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No 160. VOL. VII. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

BUYING A HEART; OR, A FAIR MARTYR.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY.

AUTHOR OF "SINNED AGAINST," "HONOR BOUND," "A STRANGE MARRIAGE," ETC., ETC.



"YOUR SISTER'S HAPPINESS RESTS WITH YOU. NOT ME. IT IS YOU WHO HAVE TO DECIDE."

Buying a Heart;

OR,

A FAIR MARTYR.

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CHAPTER I.

THE SHATTERED BRIDGE.

It was called Glen House, and was a handsome, spacious building, situate in a wild, picturesque spot among the Berkshire hills—a somewhat drear place for two young girls to dwell alone in, their sole attendants a middle-aged woman, and her husband, who acted as gardener. Barrington, a highly respectable and social community a mile distant, had wondered much upon hearing of the advent of the new tenants.

Such a solitary place! They wondered the girls were not frightened out of their lives!

The astonishment increased when the calls made upon the youthful inmates of Glen House were neither received nor returned. The sisters apparently desired to be as lonely as their residence. The circumstance naturally produced a mystery, and consequently caused rumors to get afloat.

There must be some serious cause to induce two handsome, lady-like girls, one eighteen, the other but three years or so older, to avoid society, and live in such isolation. It became evident to everybody from that moment that everybody had a duty, a mission to perform—namely, to discover the nature of the cause.

Barrington's opinion apparently little disturbed the two sisters, who, when they walked abroad, always took the direction of the glen, where few people ever went. Those who did meet them averred that a sadness was upon both the young faces, especially on that of the elder.

One hot, oppressive August evening the two sisters were together in the drawing-room, the windows of which, thrown wide, commanded a full view of the glen; the house standing at its entrance. The hills forming the sides were high, steep and rugged, with here and there a dark group of pines. At the far end from the hills fell a miniature cataract, lovely in sunshine, ghostly in moonlight, that formed a good-sized river, which ran rushing and whirling through the glen. Over this, connecting the two banks, and reached by a steep winding path from the crest of the hill, was a pretty light rustic bridge.

"How depressing is the weather, is it not, Mildred?" remarked the elder sister, resting the book she had been languidly trying to read upon her knees. "We are surely about to have a heavy storm."

"I am delighted to hear it, Helen!"

"Delighted?"

"Yes; delighted at anything that for a space will break the cruel monotony of our existence. Helen, I am heart-sick of it!"

And the speaker, who, suppressing many a yawn, had been pacing the room with something of the feeling of a caged animal, came and sat down on a low ottoman near her sister's chair.

The last rays of the setting sun shone on them, making a lovely picture in the large bay window, and fully displaying the marked contrast between the two girls.

The elder, tall, graceful, and of commanding figure, was dark; with handsome features, well-cut, and decided; the brows slightly arched; the large, dark eyes liquid, earnest, yet tender; while the expression of the countenance was self-contained and fearless.

The younger was a gentle blonde; the skin creamy and pure as a child's; the features small, sensitive, and delicate; the eyes shadowed by long lashes, of a clear azure blue, full of softness, delicacy and love. Her hair, thick and glossy, was of the hue of Australian gold; her expression that of one who relied on the

will of others rather than on her own. Her nature evidently to be caressed and taken care of. And from her babyhood so had it been.

Helen Houghton's dark eyes shone with an almost maternal affection as they rested on her; and it was rather after that spirit that she spoke than like one so few years the senior.

"Poor Mildred! It is dull, and unnatural for such a lively being as you," she smiled, "so capable of enjoying life! Still, dear, for the present it must be your lot; even existence at Glen House with Martha and old Grayson is preferable to the risk—"

"Of crossing the path of Sydney Brice," broke in Mildred, with a shiver, while her cheeks lost something of their color. "Yes, Lennie; I have to think of that to feel reconciled to solitude and Glen House. Ah, me! should we ever meet—"

"Here, Mildred, it is impossible!"

"But if we should, Helen, I should have to be the victim; and what a wretched fate!"

"Darling, do not fright yourself by improbabilities. Here we are as if dead to Sydney Brice. When we are sure he has given up his search we will let this place, slip away quietly to some pretty foreign town, and—"

"Return to the world," broke in Mildred, laughing gayly, for her moments of sadness were brief. "Surely, Lennie, in a year we may risk it, fold our tents like the Arabs, and stealthily steal away. Ah! there's a flash! You were right about the storm."

While they had been talking the sun had sunk, and as if that had been the signal for the tempest to commence, the sky had grown black with clouds, which were suddenly rent by a vivid flash of lightning, followed almost instantaneously by a loud peal of thunder.

In a few seconds the heavy languorous aspect of the glen was changed; rough gusts of wind swept down it, swaying the pines as if they would tear them up by the roots, followed by periods of deep stillness. Then the lightning quivered from the clouds, and the thunder pealed, while the atmosphere was filled with a dull, pale twilight, that made objects visible, but all of one gray tone. For a brief space this had continued, when a more than ordinarily loud crash of thunder was succeeded by a deluge of rain. It fell so rapidly and in such volumes, lashing the earth so fiercely, that for some while the glen was shut out from the sisters' view by the watery veil, through which the roar and rush of the Glen Falls, as, swollen, they dashed from their heights, inundating the river's banks, could be plainly heard.

The rain discharge was almost as short as violent. It soon began to abate, and though heavy, no longer shut out the glen from Mildred and Helen, as admiringly, yet with a sensation of awe, they watched the wild war of the elements. A pine had been rent from the earth, and was hanging over the falls, which leaped and rushed downward in a mass of white foam.

"It is very grand!" murmured Helen.

"Not to any one, I suspect, out on the hills," laughed Mildred.

"Out on the hills! Do not think of such a thing, Millie. It would be terrible. Fortunately, the storm has given ample warning for any one, if any one there has been, to seek shelter."

"I don't know that," smiled her sister. "All persons are not weatherwise, Lennie. Still, for once, let us hope they are. See how high the river is, Lennie—nearly to the bridge. And see how the waters whirl beneath it. Look!" she added, bending forward excitedly; "the center support has given! Yes, there it goes—or rather comes—spinning down the river!"

"We must give warning of that at Barrington directly the storm abates," remarked Helen. "It would be dangerous for any one to cross it."

"Dangerous! Why, it was always a shaky affair, Lennie. I have often thought my weight even might break it. Now it would hardly

support a goat. It ought to have been repaired long ago. There's another flash; the storm appears only to have paused to take breath."

"Look yonder, Mildred!" exclaimed Helen, abruptly. "What is that?"

"What? Where do you mean, dear?"

"On the hill-path. Rather more than half-way up. Something is surely moving about!" she ejaculated, excitedly. "Look—look!"

"Something?" replied the sister, after a moment's scrutiny. "It's somebody—it's two somebodies. It's two men descending, Lennie."

"Impossible! Mildred, they must be mad!"

Mildred had flown to the table, and brought back a small telescope.

"Mad or sane," she replied, as she found the right focus, "it is true."

"Can you see them plainly?"

"Not very. Yes, now I can, for they have moved."

"Are they Barrington people?"

"No," she answered, slightly shifting the glass. "They look like tourists; they walk as though in doubt of the path. One is middle-aged, at least; the other young. The first slips; now they pause as in doubt."

"And now they come on!" exclaimed Helen. "Surely they will never attempt to cross the bridge!" she added, starting up with alarm.

"Surely," ejaculated Mildred, lowering the glass, of which there was now no need, "they will; that's what they intend. If they are tourists, how are they to know the danger? Lennie, it's my belief they are making their way here to seek shelter."

"They must be warned!" cried Helen, starting up.

"Too late, Lennie! Before old Grayson could get near enough to attract their attention, before even we could sign to them, they would be on it. Let us—oh, let us hope," and she clasped her hands, "the bridge may be stronger than we believe!"

Side by side, the lightning now and again illumining their figures and those of the tourists, the two sisters watched breathlessly, clinging to each other.

When Mildred had last spoken, the two men had not been twenty yards from the bridge. In a few minutes they were upon it. The girls held their breath. The figures of the men were distinctly shown against the background formed by the falls. They advanced to the center, and were seen to pause; then, like a flash, so rapid was it, bridge and men vanished into the boiling river.

"Oh, Heaven!" cried Mildred. "They are gone—they are killed!"

"No, no! Help—help!" screamed Helen, in tones that rung through the house. "Mildred, call Grayson! Tell him to bring ropes quickly!"

"Wherefore, Lennie?"

"Perhaps at the river's bend, where are the trees, we may help them. Oh, why did we not think of it before? Quick—quick! then follow me."

Hatless, shawless, regardless of the storm, she ran out through the open window toward the river. At the same moment old Martha, alarmed by the screams, came hurriedly in. Mildred, scared, terrified, in a few words explained what had happened, and the need, bidding Grayson hasten, then she followed Helen.

On the bank eagerly, anxiously, they waited. Rough and yellow the waters whirled and rushed at their feet. Sometimes, a branch of tangled grass, forcibly rent away, would pass swiftly, seen but a second, then gone. Now came a fragment of broken wood. It was a portion of the bridge.

Not many seconds elapsed before Grayson, the gardener, ran up, a coil of rope in his grasp.

"They must be here soon. Have all prepared," said Helen. "Ah! what is that? It is one of them. There—there—close on yonder tree! Why does he not catch it?"

They all bent breathlessly over the bank, watching the tumbling form. Yes, had he raised his hand, easily he might have clutched a bough, and checked his whirling course; but he never moved.

Coming nearer, they perceived that he was lying partly supported on a fragment of the bridge. One arm was over it, the face downward on it; the fair hair dank and straight. He made no effort for life. Was he dead?

"Miss Mildred," exclaimed Grayson, "the water will bring him close to the bend. If you can help me, I may be able to lean far enough over to catch him."

The sisters, taking the gardener's hand, kept him from falling into the fierce tide, while he extended his arm toward the whirling object rushing toward them. If he should fail in his grasp, all hope of rescue would be gone!

New—now! There, it is close! A sudden lunge. Missed! No; the gardener's fingers have gripped the arm flung around the wood; a moment after he is pulling its owner onto the bank.

He was a tall, handsome, dark young man, in tourist suit. As they laid him on the grass Mildred felt her throat swell hysterically. How pale, how still he was! Had their help come too late?

"Grayson! Grayson! should not a doctor be sought?" she ejaculated, kneeling on the grass. "What shall we do? We must not let him die!"

"I reckon he'll not die, Miss Mildred," said the old gardener; "a bit stunned p'raps. We'd best be looking after the other poor chap, and attend to this one later."

"I had forgotten the other," rejoined Mildred starting up. "Let us go."

"No, no," remarked Helen. "See, Grayson, to this one. He requires instant attention. You and Martha had better bear him into the lodge. We need not trouble about his friend. He is safe; he has managed to catch the branches, and is climbing along them to the bank yonder. I will go to him."

Even as she ended, she moved swiftly toward the spot where the second tourist would land. He was drawing himself up the muddy bank through the bushes as she arrived.

"Ah, sir," she said earnestly, "you have been more fortunate than your companion!"

At the sound of her voice, the man looked quickly up.

"Helen Houghton!" he ejaculated.

A cry broke from the girl's lips. White, giddy, her eyes full of horror, she staggered back, clutching at a tree for support, and moaning forth, "Sydney Brice!"

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF AN ORDEAL.

THERE was a pause, during which the two regarded each other. Then Sydney Bryce, uttering a short, amused laugh, rose to his feet, a trifle dizzy from the beating in the river.

He was a man of about five-and-forty, of middle height, and squarely built. His complexion was sallow, his dark hair cut close and trimmed like a Frenchman's, his mustache and beard following the same style; his eyes were small, quick, with a mocking sneer about them.

"So we really meet again, Miss Houghton," he remarked, pressing the water from the sleeves of his coat. "Now tell me—do you think I have been fairly treated? Speak the truth."

"If not, surely circumstances accounted for it," she murmured.

"Your father's death? Hardly. The document had been signed and sealed, as the saying goes, the money given. A promise, Miss Houghton, is a promise. Am I to thank you or my affianced wife for the game of hide and seek that has been played?"

Helen did not at once answer; she was thinking of the fearful blow this would be to Mildred. She saw her graceful figure following

Grayson and Martha, who were bearing the injured man to the lodge.

Oh, why had not the river drowned Sydney Brice!

"Both, I suspect, as you are silent," he laughed. "But, if I am not mistaken, there goes my fair Mildred. How little she anticipates the joy awaiting her—how little does she! Suppose we join her?"

He made a step as though to carry out his words. It aroused Helen. She caught him by the arm; she would almost sooner die than see him an inmate of the Glen House.

"Mr. Brice," she exclaimed, "be merciful! That the idea of the union was distasteful to Mildred is hardly to be wondered at, for remember to her you were as a stranger. She, indeed, is almost a stranger to you. You know nothing of her."

"Only that she is the prettiest girl I ever saw, and the one I selected for a wife, and my wife she must be. You don't say no to that, I expect, Miss Houghton?"

"How can I? A promise is a promise," murmured the girl, faintly; "yet hear me. Mildred is not strong; a shock might—might be dangerous to her. I entreat—I implore you not abruptly to reveal yourself to her. Conceal your identity for a while. If she should get used to you—"

"The union may not be so repugnant," he smiled. "Well, I will agree to that. It chances that I am not traveling under my own name. I rarely do on my summer trips, or I am sure to find friends where I do not want them. My present title is Sydney Spalding. Yes, I consent to the plan, Miss Houghton. I'll see if, under an *incognito*, I may win some regard from her; but the end must be the same, or the world shall know that Anthony Houghton died a bankrupt and dishonored!"

"Mr. Brice—"

"Spalding," he put in, quietly.

"That shall never be said of our father, nor of us, whatever the sacrifice!" she rejoined proudly.

"Good! Now, pray grant me shelter, and a fire for these saturated clothes. Fortunately, we left our baggage in the village."

"Who is your friend?" asked Helen, abruptly. "Does he know—"

"Nothing. As to friend, he is but a fellow-traveler whom I picked up on the road, a Mr. Laurence Hawkwood, an artist, on a tour professionally and for pleasure. Has some talent; but is too well off to make any great mark. The true grindstone to bring out a man's genius is when he has to toil for his daily bread. So, Miss Houghton—"

"Hush! Here is my sister."

Mildred was perceived coming quickly toward them.

"Why, Helen, what a time you are!" she exclaimed, half-reproachfully, in her soft, musical accents. "I trust this gentleman is not hurt."

"Not in the least—many thanks," rejoined Sydney Brice, gallantly. "Being a good and strong swimmer, I begin rather to be grateful to the immersion, as it proves the means of my enjoying the generous hospitality of the fair hostesses of Glen House."

"Your friend, sir, has not been so fortunate," said Mildred, gravely. "He appears stunned by a blow on the temple, while the gardener fears the left arm is broken."

"Poor fellow!"

"Will you come to him? He may recognize your voice, and it will rouse him," asked Mildred, a wistful, anxious expression in her large blue eyes.

"Certainly—the more willingly," laughed Sydney Brice, "as these wet garments are striking unpleasantly chill."

As they moved away, Mildred whispered:

"That foolish Martha has persisted in putting our invalid in the lodge bedroom, Lennie. She declares that as we are but two young, girlish hostesses—with a laugh—"it would not be right to admit two strange men under our very roof. The neighbors would talk."

"Very probably. Martha is right, Millie; trust her. As yet we do not know who—who"—her voice faltered—"these men are."

"The one in the lodge is a gentleman; I am certain of that," responded the sister; adding, with a slight pout of her lips: "I'll not be answerable for the other, though he might be."

Helen shivered, and made no response; but she was glad that, through the foresight of old Martha, Sydney Brice was not to take up his abode in Glen House itself.

Sydney Brice rather knit his brows upon this proceeding; still he remained quiet, biding his time, as he told himself.

Leaving Martha to see to their needs, while the old man was bringing the doctor from the village, the sisters returned to the house to change their wet clothing.

"Well, Lennie, this is quite an adventure, is it not?" laughed Mildred. "Quite a pleasant change to the monotony—that is," she added, "if the younger of our unexpected guests be not seriously hurt."

"An adventure I could well have dispensed with," rejoined Helen, gravely.

"Oh, I could not. I think it delightful. And the romantic surmise of who may be our visitors—think of that!" laughed the girl. "They ought to turn out somebodies, to make the romance complete."

"Turn out somebody!" exclaimed Helen. "Do not talk like that, Milly. There's been small pleasant romance in our lives; it is wisest to expect none. What spirits you are in!"

"I may say the same, Lennie, only yours are dull ones. You are quite pale, too. The shock has been too much for you."

"It has, Mildred. My brain is in a whirl."

"Dear! and I always thought you the stronger of us two. Lie down awhile. Martha can tell me what the doctor says when he comes."

"No, no, Milly. If I am weak in one way, I am strong in not yielding to it. I shall be dressed as soon as you."

"Dressed to do honor to our visitors," smiled Mildred, the flush of excitement on her cheek making her look exquisitely pretty. "Did you see the younger one well, Lennie? Don't you think him very handsome?"

"I hardly saw him," responded Helen, absently. "My attention was engaged by the other."

"That one!" with a shrug at herself in the glass; "I don't like him at all."

"Mildred!"

"Why do you start and look so frightened, Lennie?" exclaimed the girl, laughing. "The romance is not to make us like both. Confess that you yourself were not attracted to him with his French cut hair and dark, sneering eyes? Or if you were, I resign him without a sigh to you. There!" and she dropped a sweeping courtesy.

"Mildred, Mildred, do be serious. What can it matter if either of these men be handsome—"

"Nothing, of course," said the girl, though her lashes fell and her color heightened.

"At present they are both our guests—"

"And shall be treated civilly. Though I do not like the elder one's appearance, that is no reason I should be rude. By the way, I suppose he did not introduce himself? You were talking a long while together."

"Yes; he is a Mr. Spalding. Traveling—traveling for pleasure."

"And his friend?" asked Mildred, quickly.

"A mere traveling acquaintance—an artist. Mr.—Mr. Laurence Hawkwood."

"There's the doctor at last, Lennie. I'll wait for Martha in the drawing-room. Be quick, dear."

She turned from the window, out of which she had been looking, and ran from the apartment.

"An artist," she murmured, as she descended the stairs; "that adds to the romance. Laurence Hawkwood—a very pretty name. Better far than Spalding. Each," with a merry pout, "suits its owner."

The doctor's verdict pleased two persons,

though in a different way—Sydney Brice and Mildred Houghton. That verdict was that Mr. Laurence Hawkwood would remain an invalid for some time. His left arm was broken; the temple had been violently struck, and his side much bruised; all necessitating complete rest to insure recovery, though if fever could be kept out there was no danger.

On the story getting abroad—and it occasioned quite an excitement at Barrington—many offers arrived to free the young hostesses of their guests directly the artist could be moved.

"It must," those who offered averred, "be so uncomfortable for ladies so young."

Young! Helen began to feel almost aged by trouble and anxiety. Gladly would she have been rid of Sydney Brice had not there predominated the fear of letting him out of her sight. So she returned civil acknowledgments for the offers; but said, as the gentlemen merely occupied the lodge, they occasioned no inconvenience to the inmates of the house.

So the days passed on, bringing Laurence Hawkwood toward recovery, during which Helen had to confess that she had no complaint to make of Sydney Brice. He rarely interrupted their privacy without apparent reason, and when meeting them in the grounds was excessively polite. He would offer his assistance to Mildred when she gardened, and even, to her amusement, began a mild flirtation. Helen trembled and grew uneasy when she saw them together. A dozen times she told herself it would have been wisest to make the confession to the poor girl at first—that this was the Sydney Brice she had sworn to marry. But as she looked into the bright, happy face her lips became mute.

"Your opinion of Mr. Spalding is changing, I fancy, Millie?" she ventured to say one day.

"Not much, Lennie," with a little shrug. "He tries his best, I believe, to be pleasant, and really is more so than Grayson. Still, it's a change," she added; "so pray do not think that I want their stay shortened."

"If she only—only knew!" reflected Helen, with a sigh.

That one trouble in prospect quite blinded her to another. She did not note that Mildred's lashes always fell and a smile, partly suppressed, quivered about her small mouth, at the mention of Laurence Hawkwood. He had sent the nicest messages to his hostesses, and had so pleasantly expressed his gratitude to the preservers of his life. His last message was that the doctor gave him hopes that in a few days he might express those thanks in person.

Mildred had been silent some while after that announcement, brought by Martha. Then she had grown restless, gay and excited, in her secret heart wishing the hours to pass, that the convalescent might appear. For, if the truth must be owned, she felt already more than an interest in Laurence Hawkwood.

The artist was to pay his first visit on the morrow, as the ladies would be able to receive him, when Martha brought Helen a note from Sydney Brice. It was written in Italian, and contained these sentences:

"I must see you, and alone. I have observed from the grounds that Mildred spends an hour after dinner always at her piano. Come then to the grove. I will wait you there."

The tone of command—for there was no suggestion of will you, or can you?—brought the color to Helen's cheeks. Yet, even as she tore the note into minute fragments, she knew she must obey.

So, when dinner was over, and the purple dusk had settled over the glen, seeing Mildred safely at her piano, she threw a lace shawl over her head and leaving the room by the window unperceived, hastened to the grove.

What had Sydney Brice to say? She answered the mental question at once. In her own mind there was no doubt. Laurence Hawkwood, being convalescent, was strong enough to quit the lodge. There was no excuse

for further remaining; hence, Mildred must be told her fate.

But how could Helen do it? Even as the sister thus thought, entering the grove, she perceived the glowing tip of Sydney Brice's cigar; at the same moment the rush of the falls came with singular distinctness on her ear; and the regret would possess her that the swollen river had permitted to escape one of its offered victims.

On perceiving her, Sydney Brice threw away his cigar and advanced.

"You have not kept me long," he remarked, smiling. "Very unlike a woman, that." In return, Miss Houghton, I will not detain you longer than I can help. Who knows?—if we were discovered taking this moonlight stroll, Mildred might be jealous."

"Mr. Brice," said Helen, coldly, "you have me in your power, and should respect my helplessness."

"I will, Miss Houghton. You played me a shabby trick, but I admire you. Then listen to what I desire to say. Hawkwood, in two or three days, will be quite well enough to leave here. If he go, I shall have no excuse for remaining."

Helen listened breathlessly.

"Yet I intend to remain. It is not likely that I would again lose sight of Mildred, or you would surely spirit her away beyond my ken; still, at present I am so well satisfied with the position of affairs, that I am in no haste to throw off my *incognito*."

Helen's heart gave a bound of relief.

"So, as I wish to remain, and as I am aware the proprieties will not allow you and Mildred to receive guests while you are alone here, you must have a chaperon."

"A chaperon!" ejaculated Helen, surprised.

"Exactly. If you had had friends they would have advised you to have had one instantly on your father's demise. It was not right you, so young, should live alone. At any rate, it must end now."

"Must end!" He commanded!

Helen was silent, but her hands were convulsively clutched beneath her shawl.

"Now, the question is, have you any female relation married, and elderly enough to be a companion?" asked Sydney Brice, in the most matter-of-fact tone.

"None," she shortly answered.

"I thought as much. Well, then, you must pay a lady for her services; and, as I suspect you are acquainted with no person suitable, I can recommend a most excellent one—a widow, and a lady accustomed to society."

Unable to bear it longer, Helen broke in: "There can be no necessity for this. This house is mine; I am its mistress. I desire no one to usurp my power. Mr. Brice, you have no right to make this—this demand. I will not yield to it!"

She was trembling violently; her voice was broken and agitated.

Quietly he raised his shoulders.

"Perfectly true, Miss Houghton; I have no right," he laughed; "neither do I make a demand. It was a suggestion; or, rather, a condition. I do not intend to let Mildred again out of my sight; but I do not wish to make a scandal. So accept the chaperon, and throw open Glen House to visitors, and I yet, for a space, preserve my *incognito*; refuse, and I accompany you back, and at once claim, as Sydney Brice, my affianced wife." It is you, Miss Houghton, who must decide. Take time, reflect; only I must know the result before we part."

It did not take her long to come to a resolve. She knew Sydney Brice to be quite capable of what he threatened. What did it matter, after all, this woman's coming? There was no need of their avoiding society now. The abandonment of their seclusion would pleasure Mildred. Might she not by yielding delay the confession that Sydney Spaulding was Sydney Brice? And with delay was there not hope that something might occur to prevent the disclosure at all?

"I consent," she said, in a low tone, raising her head. "This woman can come!"

"You have decided wisely, Miss Houghton. The lady's name is Mrs. Airly. Having the pleasure of her acquaintance, I had better write to her to explain what is required. I will leave you to find a suitable reason to account for her arrival to Mildred. Now I think I need detain you no longer."

Without another word, she left him. Swiftly she regained the house, and ascended to her own apartments. Passing the drawing-room door she heard Mildred's clear sweet voice singing a lively French song.

She hurried on, reached her room, threw herself on her couch, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER III.

MR. ROBERT LLANDELLS.

MILDRED heard of the advent of a chaperon, whose presence would enable them to receive society, with unqualified delight.

"What is the use of being young and capable of enjoying oneself," she remarked, "to be shut up solitary here? We shall only mix with the Barrington people, and there will be no danger in that, will there, Lennie?"

Helen most truthfully could answer no. She had told Mildred that she had been thinking it was hardly necessary they should keep so secluded; therefore had thought of writing to a lady of whom she had heard to come and act as their companion; and Mildred had been too delighted at what she termed their emancipation, to feel surprise at the sudden resolve, or the want of spirit in her sister's voice.

Indeed, the announcement had removed an anxiety from her mind. If Laurence Hawkwood should be well enough to get about in a very few days, etiquette would cause the friends to quit the lodge. Then, though Mr. Spaulding had declared that he had been so charmed by the beauties of the place that he should not leave for some time, the sisters would not be able to receive them more than other guests. The arrival of Mrs. Airly, however, would put that all right at once. The next day, so wished for by Mildred, came, and with it Laurence Hawkwood to Glen House. He was really handsome, a gentleman with winning and engaging manners, added to which was a pleasantly joyous smile that lighted all his features, especially his eyes, which, with more than an artist's admiration, wandered very frequently in Mildred's direction.

Sydney Brice had accompanied his friend, and, able to be agreeable when he chose, the half-hour appeared to pass quickly to all parties.

When the gentlemen rose to take their leave, Sydney Brice managed to draw Helen rather aside to acquaint her with the arrangements he had made with Mrs. Airly, and when that lady might be expected. Laurence Hawkwood seized the opportunity to cross to Mildred.

"What a charmingly picturesque spot this is!" he remarked, glancing out of the window. Then, as his eyes returning, dwelt on her face. "My wretched accident has made all my time lost."

"If that of the past is lost," she smiled, with a half shy glance, and thinking that his pallor and his having his arm in a sling, made him look exceedingly interesting, "you have yet the future."

"That is true," he answered, earnestly. "Yes, thanks to you and your sister, I have yet a future."

"Oh, pray do not leave out old Grayson!" she laughed; "I fear you would have had a poor chance but for him."

"I prefer to regard him," smiled the artist, "as the life-buoy or any other life-preserver you would have thrown to me had you possessed one. We are not grateful to the life-buoy, but to the thrower. I prefer feeling that I owe my life to you and your sister. I like to feel under that obligation, though never can it be in my power to repay it."

"That," she laughed, coquettishly, "is, I suppose, because you value life so highly. But

you are an artist," she added, gayly; "so in the future admiration of your pictures we shall be repaid. When we read the praise of your pictures Helen and I will say, 'They never would have been but for us!'"

"You are very kind," he rejoined, with a comic expression; "but it is a proof you have never seen my pictures."

"But I hope to do so. Will you show them to me?"

"With pleasure, the sketches I have with me; but if you are at all a judge of art, I fear you will be disappointed."

"They say geniuses never see their own talent," she remarked. "But before you leave, will you not take some sketches of this glen?"

"I should be glad. I have noticed that the early morning effects are very striking."

"Are they not?" she said, with sudden vivacity. "I like the morning. I like best walking or gardening then."

He knew that, for he had watched her often from the lodge, and had already many a sketch of the fair, lovely visage and graceful, girlish figure.

"You so kindly insist, you and your sister," he said, "that I quit not my pleasant dwelling for a day or two longer, that I shall at once seize the opportunity this gives me."

The conversation was here interrupted by the approach of Sydney Brice; and soon after the two took leave together.

The next morning, of course by quite a coincidence, Mildred and Lawrence Hawkwood met in the grounds of Glen House. He had his sketch-book with him, intending to sketch as well as he could, having his left arm yet in a sling. It was but natural that he should show Mildred his sketches, that he should ask her opinion as to the best effect of the falls. That was a long time arranging, so long that the artist had to defer the commencing until the morrow, for the hour of breakfast had arrived both at the lodge and the house.

They parted mutually pleased with each other. Mildred felt that there was a happiness in this world of which she had never dreamed, and he that for the first time he had seen one woman whom he regarded differently to all others.

Laurence Hawkwood was by birth and education a gentleman. He followed the profession of an artist from natural liking, not as a livelihood, having a very comfortable little private fortune. He was quite his own master, having no one's inclinations to consider save his own. Marriage had been with him an idea of the future, until acquaintance with Mildred had caused him to be thoughtful upon the subject.

Why should he not love her?—why not marry her? In every way she seemed a match that even society would approve. A lady, beautiful and young. True, she was penniless; that the Glen House belonged to her sister, or half-sister. So much he had learned during his stay at the lodge; but what in this case was money? His fortune was enough for both.

Mildred had not reached the stage of reasoning yet, but she was in very gay spirits at breakfast that morning, until she noticed that her sister was pale and depressed, when her affection and concern were so keenly aroused, that Helen, fearful of her secret escaping her, had to hide her anxiety beneath a semblance of ease and cheerfulness.

The coming of a chaperon to the Miss Houghtons had, as news will, speedily got abroad, and reached Barrington, creating some little commotion and comment. A chaperon would no more be needed now than before, without some special reason. Had that reason anything to do with the two strangers, one of whom it was known was young and good-looking? Or were the Misses Houghton getting weary of their seclusion? Lastly, what kind of lady was this protectress?

At the end of four days Mrs. Airly arrived. She was a woman of apparently five-and-forty,

rather above middle height, stout, and well-looking; large dark eyes, pale complexion with just a tinge of "color" on her cheeks; her nose was aquiline, giving a dignity to the countenance, carried out by the erectness of her carriage. Her dress was, if anything, rather too rich.

Helen, as she greeted her, felt chilled. Mildred was awe-struck, frightened,—“Just,” she confided to her sister, “as when I saw Miss Barjus first, when dear papa took me to boarding-school.”

Mrs. Airly had what is termed a presence, and duly impressed society with it. Yet there was something about the lady—something which they could not exactly define—that repelled the two girls.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Airly, dignified, stately, showed every disposition to be amiable and agreeable; and Helen, with a sigh, half of relief, decided that the chaperon's company was not likely to prove the disturbing element she had feared.

The person on whom Mrs. Airly produced the greatest effect was Laurence Hawkwood. It was at an afternoon tea when he first saw her. He did so with a start and a look of surprise and gravity. He recovered himself quickly, finding a Mr. Robert Llandells, an unexpected guest, brought by one of the lady visitors, was steadily regarding him.

When he could manage to get near Mildred, he said, carelessly, “Mrs. Airly, your friend—”

“Scarcely a friend at present,” laughed Mildred; “our acquaintance is too short.”

“Short! Then you did not know her previously?”

“Not even her name!” slightly shaking her head.

“Ah, I perceive. She acts—as some ladies do, I am aware—as companion to you and your sister, for—pardon me, I don't mean it impertinently—a salary? You discovered her by—advertising?”

“Oh, no; I believe she was recommended to Helen by some one as a lady quite suitable to our need. Pardon me; I am wanted. Mrs. Belmore is leaving.”

“Recommended!” repeated the artist, under his breath. “Then I can say nothing. Besides, what right have I to speak?”

He had strolled to the window, and now glancing round, saw Mr. Robert Llandells standing close by, who, finding himself observed, smiled and said: “I beg your pardon; but you, I believe, are the gentleman whose life was so miraculously saved—really, though, I forget whether my sister said miraculously or romantically rescued by the Misses Houghton?”

“Yes; I have that happiness,” replied the artist, “and am proud of it.”

“No wonder. Only it was shared by another, was it not? Your friend—your cousin. I must beg to apologize if I am making any blunder, but I fear I heard the story imperfectly.”

The words were so pleasantly spoken, while there was so agreeable an expression on the grave, good-looking countenance that Laurence felt drawn into confidence.

“Certainly no relation,” he laughed. “I met Mr. Spalding at a hotel where I stayed, and our route lying in the same direction, we joined company.”

“Ah, I perceive. Mr. Spalding—that is his name. Then you are not exactly acquainted with him?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“He seems very agreeable, or anxious to make himself so. A welcome addition in a country house.”

Soon after, Robert Llandells moved to another part of the room, but did not appear to lose his interest in Mr. Sydney Spalding.

Toward the close of the afternoon that gentleman found himself by the stately but suave Mrs. Airly.

“Well,” he inquired, in a half-whisper, “how do you think you will like your quarters?”

“Exceedingly well. The young ladies seem

amiable and amenable; but what ever made you choose the younger one?”

“Why not? Do you not consider her very lovely?”

“Yes; but girlish; far more suited to a husband of young Hawkwood's age, and not in any way to be compared to her handsome sister. Besides, the latter is rich. How does that happen?”

“Anthony Houghton married twice. Though a good husband in one way, he was by nature a spendthrift. He could not by any possibility keep a dollar in his pocket, especially if some one decided to get it from him. Consequently his first wife's uncle so settled this place, Glen House, and the small fortune attached thereto, that not only by no possibility could he touch a cent, but the wife could not give it over to him, or she would have committed fraud against the child she left.”

“Did you know this at the time when—”

“I have learned it only since my arrival here. It appears Helen Houghton could not touch this property until she was twenty-one. Before she was that her father died.”

“And now she is the whole and sole mistress?”

“Whole and sole, and has offered to hand it over to me all if I will release her sister.”

“And you have refused? Never!”

“Yes,” answered Sydney Brice; “for the handing over would require signatures of trustees, executors, and the like, who might see reason to object, therefore I prefer letting matters remain as they are. Now I'll go. We had better not be seen talking too long together.”

As Sydney Brice walked slowly back to the hotel at Barrington, he was very thoughtful. So was Mr. Robert Llandells as he drove home with his sister, Mrs. Norton.

“Bob,” laughed the lady, drawing the lash of her whip lightly over the ponies' necks, “what is the matter with you? You are in quite a brown study. Surely you have not fallen in love with either of the Misses Houghton at first sight?”

“One might easily,” he smiled. “They are both very beautiful, though, in my opinion, the elder bears away the palm.”

Mr. Robert Llandells was still thoughtful when he dressed for dinner, and before quitting his room dispatched a letter to some one in New York, writing outside on the envelope, “Immediate.”

CHAPTER IV.

MILLIE'S CONFESSION.

BEFORE three weeks were over the usual life at Glen House had undergone a great change. Instead of the most solitary residence in the neighborhood, it was one of the gayest. Mrs. Airly not only proved herself accustomed to society, but fond of it. Invitations poured in upon the sisters, which, by the chaperon's advice and Mildred's eager desire, were always accepted, and, consequently, return engagements had to be given.

Helen made no effort at resistance. Of what use? Mrs. Airly was really the mistress of Glen House, and evidently was under Sydney Brice's orders. Mildred most innocently added to her suffering. The younger sister no longer seemed the same. From morning to night her voice, bright, happy, gay, might be heard. Not a moment's trouble dimmed her existence. She had got over even her dislike to the stately Mrs. Airly. We always feel a kindness to those who are the means of causing us happiness, and Mrs. Airly's fondness for society enabled Mildred the oftener to meet Laurence Hawkwood, who had found the scenery so exceedingly attractive that he had postponed his departure indefinitely.

Helen was as greatly changed as Mildred, only in a different way. She was pale and listless, dull and silent, and fell into fits of reverie even in company. Every one acknowledged her beauty, but gave the preference to

the lively young sister. Was the elder affected? Was she ill? Was she "posing" for effect? Even Millie rallied her, and sometimes pouted and felt slightly injured that Lennie did not enter more fully into her enjoyments.

In Glen House or abroad Helen felt sadly alone, having to bear her miserable secret that the man whom her sister feared was at her elbow, without the smallest atom of sympathy.

No; that was hardly true. There was one who somehow always managed to get to her side, and who had a way of talking and looking at her that soothed and, for the time, made her forget her troubles. This was Robert Llandells.

He could not possibly know anything of the cause of her care; yet there was such a suggestion of sympathy, pity, and support in his manner that she began to look forward to his society as a fountain from which to draw strength.

"If he were to go—to leave here," she reflected, "I feel that I should lose all heart—that I should succumb. It is he who bears me up."

Before long, possessing an intellect, she began to understand this sensation—that Robert Llandells was becoming a necessity to her—that he was taking that place in her heart which no man before him had been permitted to occupy.

When that knowledge came, a blush rose to her cheek, a pleasurable thrill ran through her veins, a sensation of a soft, exquisite joy possessed her, until the recollection of Mildred's sad fate recurred, and angrily she blamed herself for her selfishness. Poor, innocent, unconscious Mildred!

But Mildred seemed a more fitting subject for envy than pity, as, one early morning, about a month after Mrs. Airly's arrival, she issued from Glen House, attired in a simple but most becoming morning toilet, a straw hat just slightly tilted over her forehead to shade her eyes.

It may have been merely a coincidence that she proceeded, after a few turns about the flower-beds, toward the path separated by a low boundary hedge from the glen, and it may have been quite an accident that at the moment Laurence Hawkwood, with sketch-book and easel, was coming up the latter.

Perceiving her, he hastened his steps, and soon the low hedge alone divided them.

"How fortunate I am in seeing you!" he remarked. "I have completed my sketch at last, and want your opinion, if you will favor me with it."

"My opinion!" she smiled. "You make me regret, Mr. Hawkwood, that I am so poor a judge."

He took out the sketch, and held it over the hedge that a good light might fall on it.

To observe it well, Mildred leaned a little forward, not observing how close it brought her pretty golden head to that of the artist, and unconscious of the ardent gaze he had fixed upon her.

"Oh, it is exquisite!" she exclaimed. "How pretty the falls look!—and how perfectly you have caught the morning mist over them! I should recognize it anywhere. What a gift it must be to be an artist, Mr. Hawkwood!"

"It is a great pleasure—at least, I find it so," he rejoined, still gazing at her. "When I am far away I shall be able to look on this picture—for I will never part with it—and recall the happiest days I have ever known."

His words fell chill on Mildred's heart. She felt the color steal from her cheek; a sadness like the presentiment of some approaching trouble weighed upon her.

What would Glen House—what would life, despite the changes that lately had come to both, be with Laurence Hawkwood away? He had grown to be a part of her waking thoughts, of her dreams, of herself.

Conquering by an effort the nervous tremor of her lips, annoyed that she had paused, she answered, "To carry away sketches of places we have visited with pleasure must be delight-

ful. Yet," with a little laugh, "you can hardly have agreeable memories of our river."

"On the contrary, I hold it in more esteem than all rivers. A simple act of justice, Miss Houghton, having such cause to be grateful to it."

"Grateful, when it nearly killed you?" She glanced quickly up at him, then as quickly averted her gaze.

"Rather say that it gave me a new life," he answered, slightly dropping his voice; "for it brought me acquainted with—with those I can never forget. Yet truly it is a joy I fear will prove akin to pain, for all my future must be dull and gray in comparison to the brightness of my stay at Barrington. I am a coward, and tremble at the coming of to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" she repeated, her look fixed on the sketch, but not seeing it. "Why to-morrow?"

He still held the canvas before her, and to any observer the two would have appeared to be examining it.

"Because—did I not tell you?—I meant to leave Barrington to-morrow!"

"Leave Barrington?"

Mildred made no sign, moved not, uttered no word. But life seemed almost to leave her.

"I thought I had told you," he proceeded; "but the idea is so full of pain, I must have avoided it. Gladly would I remain if—if I dared."

"Dared!" Mildred managed to say. "Why should you not? What is there to prevent you, Mr. Hawkwood?"

"My own wisdom; for every succeeding day I find the attractions that hold me here more difficult to abandon. Each hour here threatens to make my future darker. I have been dwelling in a sun cloud, forgetful of the drear expanse beyond. Miss Houghton, surely I am not speaking enigmas; surely you understand. I cannot so well have kept my secret that—Mildred, I love you!"

She started; her head drooped lower. In that violent revolution of feeling she had no words to say.

He loved her; he feared his affection was not returned; that only was the reason for his going.

"Do not be offended at my confession," he proceeded. "Love is beyond control. No woman has ever been to me what you are, Mildred; no woman ever can be. If I suffer, do not think that I hold you to blame. All who see you must love. Only while I have some reason left, am I not wise to quit Barrington?"

A pause, then slowly, tremblingly, yet quite audible to him, came the words, "Why—why go? Why not remain?"

He bent forward; his hand imprisoned hers.

"Why not remain?" he repeated. "Oh, Mildred, do you bid me stay?"

She looked up, a quivering joy on her lips, a modest, happy light in her eyes before the lashes veiled them, as she whispered, "Yes."

At that moment the promise given to save a father's honor—Sydney Brice—all were forgotten.

"Oh, ho!"

The exclamation was Mr. Sydney Brice's, as, half an hour later, taking his morning constitutional, from a distance he saw the artist and Mildred pacing side by side the boundary path of the Glen House grounds.

"So, Master Laurence, this is the reason for your eager desire to seize the early morning effects! And rather cool of the young lady—aware that she is betrothed. Can Helen Houghton know anything of this?" he continued to soliloquize, watching the two, and slowly puffing the smoke of his cigarette in the air. "No; that girl is the soul of honor. But I suppose I have kept my incognito too long. I must abandon it, and then, Master Laurence—then—"

Sydney Brice concluded the speech with a long and amused burst of laughter.

Then, seated on the hill-top, he fell into a reverie, complaisantly watching the two until

they moved away among the trees and were lost to view.

"I fancy, my friend Laurence," he remarked, rising, "that matters have gone very far with you. I wonder if he would take me as a confidant if I return to breakfast. If the girl has accepted him, he might, like the generality of lovers, prove communicative. Droll, that. It would scarcely do, though, for me to accept the confidence without making disclosures on my side, which at present would not exactly answer. No; I must see Helen Houghton first. I'll just stroll over the hills to Richfield, breakfast there, see if there are any letters at the post-office, and return to the village in the afternoon. By that time I shall have fully decided on my plans. One thing, I don't want to leave this place yet. Its out-of-the-world seclusion suits me. Neither do I wish to announce myself as Sydney Brice to the general public of Barrington."

All that morning Mildred found her happiness almost too great to bear. She was anxious to communicate it to Helen, yet a little nervous, too, for she felt that her sister had not even suspected the truth.

"Though how she could have failed I don't know," she reflected, as she sat in the morning-room planning how best to make her communication. "To me now it seems that everybody who was not blind must have seen it. I—as if I had known Laurence cared for me all along. Yet had Lennie suspected it, I doubt if she would have approved, because of that frightful promise. What nonsense to live in a perpetual worry! That's rather her disposition. A year having gone by, leaving us in security, there is not much chance of Sydney Brice appearing now. Whether she approve or not, I certainly will not give up Laurence, lest that odious man should find and make me fulfill my promise."

Mrs. Airly had had some household matters to arrange with Helen which had kept the latter in the chaperon's society all the morning, much to the younger sister's annoyance, who was impatient to tell her news.

"Lennie," she finally asked, going into the room where they were, "how long will you be?"

"Not long now. Why? Do you want me?"

"Yes. I have something to tell you."

Mrs. Airly looking up, glanced curiously at the pretty speaker.

"That girl has had an offer of marriage—I am sure of it," she commented. "If so, it's from Laurence Hawkwood. I suspected something in that quarter. If I am right, what will Sydney say?"

"Very particular?" smiled Helen. "I dare say, Millie, it will keep for half an hour, then I shall be in my dressing-room, as I think of walking into the village."

"Will you accept a companion?"

"Yes, if you like to go."

Mildred withdrew and ascended to her own apartment, where she began to inspect her walking toilet rather dubiously. For the first time, she found fault with it. It certainly required renovating to be more becoming. Still, this did not make her hesitate as to going into Barrington.

Go with Lennie? Of course she would. Was not there a chance that she might again see Laurence? He had asked that morning to take her likeness for the next Academy.

"Its beauty and not the skill of the artist will secure its acceptance," he had said. "Your hair, dearest, is such a wondrous color, and so rich in quantity, that I shall call the picture 'Demi-Toilette.' Your dress must be as simple as now. Your hair must fall loose about you, negligently confined by a ribbon."

"That is Laurence's idea," smiled Mildred, standing before her glass. "I wonder if it would really be becoming? Let me try."

To draw out the hairpins and shake out the heavy plaits, until the rich tresses rippled down far below her waist, was the work of a few seconds. Then the ribbon was secured, and the

happy girl, inspecting her reflection with a blush of pleasure, thought Laurence Hawkwood was decidedly right.

Just at that moment she heard Helen's door close, and not waiting to bind up her hair, she crossed the passage and knocked.

Helen Houghton had thrown herself wearily on a chair. There was that sensation upon her some feel when a thunderstorm threatens! Was it a presentiment of fresh-coming trouble?

She looked up as Mildred entered, with an expression of almost maternal fondness and admiration. The younger sister was so radiant and so happy—so innocent and pretty.

"Your news, Millie, surely must be good news," she said, gently, "to make you look so joyous."

"Good news, indeed!" responded Mildred, taking a low ottoman by her sister's chair, and leaning an arm on her knee. "I wonder if you could guess it?"

"I fear not; I am not good at riddles, Millie."

"If you tried very hard, perhaps," laughed the other, playing with her hair so as to make it serve partly as a screen.

Helen shook her head.

"I think you might. Just, you know, get an idea, Lennie. It is something, dear, that happened this morning, and which has made me very happy, as I hope it will you, when you hear."

"Millie, dear, why do you not speak plainly?" asked Helen, hurriedly.

"Because I want you to have one guess, Lennie. It will not seem so impossible if you think a moment," smiled Mildred. "It is something that I never dreamed of over a month ago, Lennie, dear; something that would never have happened had not Laurence Hawkwood fallen that day into the river—never would have happened if we had not rescued him from it."

Helen Houghton had gone white, and it was with a look of terror that she approached Mildred and caught her waist.

"Millie," she exclaimed, "what do you mean? Do not tell me that I have guessed aright, or better had we never rescued Laurence Hawkwood! What is he to you? What has he said to you?"

"That he loves me!" and the golden lashes fell, but were quickly raised again, as she added, with fond pride, "and, Lennie, I love him—ah, so dearly."

"Mildred," cried Helen, "are you mad? You could not—dared not!"

"I could, and I have dared, Lennie!" was the answer, quiet and firm. "Why should I not? Is my life to pass single and alone?"

"Millie, Millie, you must be mad!" said Helen, distracted by the idea of what would be the result if Sidney Brice were to discover this. "Oh, you should have been braver—stronger. In your position you should not have allowed any one even to glance at you with looks of love!"

"I feared this would annoy you, Lennie; but—"

"Annoy me!"—and the elder sister, rising, paced the room in much agitation. "Millie, I am distracted. You know not what trouble you may bring upon us."

"Not on you, Lennie. I must bear it alone. I am willing to do that," answered Mildred, her little chin on her hand, and tapping the floor with her foot.

"Not on me! Millie, do you think it could come on you without coming on me also? You ought to have had more firmness—more thought—"

"I ought to have been more of a stock or stone, I suppose. Love to me ought to have been an unknown feeling, of course; I ought to have recoiled in horror at the name, I ought to have hated Laurence, returned his glances with frowns, rejected his affection, and shut myself up in this place to wither and knit stockings like old Martha!"

Helen gazed pityingly on the speaker. She ought to have done this, yet to one so young,

so bright and pretty, it was a hard, unnatural fate indeed.

"Millie, forgive me if I speak angrily—if I am harsh," she exclaimed, tenderly kneeling by her side, and fondly encircling her with her arm. "You know in my heart, dear, that I am not so—that I am tortured with suffering for you. If I speak it is because I must. If you could but know—oh, try, try to understand! You cannot—you must not think of Laurence Hawkwood."

Millie averted her head.

"Dear, try to be strong! You and I will go away together. We will go abroad, if you like; you will there forget him—he you."

"Forget!" with a little scornful laugh. "That proves you have never loved, Lennie. How can you reason upon what you do not know?"

Helen caught her breath, quickly. She had an idea that she did know what love was. Still, there was no need at this moment to confess it.

"I reason, Millie, for your good—to save a great trouble. Mr.—Mr. Spalding seemed to say that Laurence would leave to-morrow. Let him go, Millie—let him go!"

"He is not going to-morrow, Lennie."

"No!"

"He was. He had thought of doing so, but will not now."

"Not now? And why, Millie?" asked Helen, peering eagerly at the sad girlish face half hid in its golden veil.

"He was going because he thought I did not love him. He will remain because I do love him. Helen, it is too late to talk now. Laurence and I are engaged. This morning I promised to be his wife."

"Engaged! His wife!" gasped Helen, starting erect. "It is impossible! Your word must go for nothing. Are you not engaged—promised, by your own voluntary act, to another?"

"Yes, to save poor papa. In return for the money that was to be lent to him to shield him from dishonor I promised to marry Sydney Brice," ejaculated Mildred, rising erect. "Well, let him find me. If, when that time arrives, I am a wife, what can he do?"

"Make public our and our father's dishonor! Millie, for that you will be answerable—can you bear the burden?"

The other's lip quivered, but with an effort she steadied it.

"It is well and easy for those to reason who do not suffer," she remarked, bitterly. "Why was it my fate to be selected?"

"Because you were the prettiest, Millie; because Sydney Brice loved you, and did not care for me! Oh, Millie! you cannot tell how I pleaded for you—how, on my knees. I implored papa not to permit you to make a sacrifice, the consequences of which you were too young to estimate! He appealed to you yourself—you accused me of want of love to papa, and you signed the promise to marry Sydney Brice when you were eighteen!"

"You were right. I did not know the consequences," said Mildred, still bitterly: "and now am I tamely to bear them? You may marry, and be happy, while I—"

"Millie, I never shall marry! Never, dear, until you are happy, at least!"

"Happy! Happy by renouncing Laurence, and wedding that black-bearded, heavy-browed Sydney Brice!" she broke in, with a hard laugh. "But that, Lennie, I'll never do. I saw him but once for a few minutes; should not remember him; but I hate him, and would sooner die than be his wife! But how absurd is all this!" she went on, in a different and less hard tone. "We have escaped this man; and one of the wildest speculations is that he should find us now. He must have given up the search by this time."

Helen started, and placed her hand quickly to her side, for at the moment she perceived Sydney Brice himself coming toward the house from the lodge.

"No, no, Millie; don't think it—pray don't!"

she implored. "Sydney Brice is not the man to do that."

"Why, Lennie, do you always look on the dark side? Did you know how much I suffer you would show a little pity. But it is not you who are to marry this man."

"Oh, Millie!"

The sound of her sister's voice, so full of gentle reproach, pain, and misery, touched Mildred's heart at once. Breaking into tears, she threw herself on the other's neck.

"Lennie, dear sister—my more than sister—forgive me!" she sobbed. "I did not mean it. I paid no heed to what I said. I know you feel for me, as I would for you, only don't ask me to give up Laurence. I love him—oh, so fondly! Were he to leave me my heart would break!"

Helen held the girl to her, suffering a grief scarcely less than that of her sister. She could not tell Mildred at that moment that the man she felt so certain would never trace them was then in the house.

"She has borne enough, poor child, for one morning," she reflected. "I must see Sydney Brice; must try again to arouse his pity. A hopeless task, I fear. Failing, as a last resource I must see Laurence Hawkwood himself."

So resolving, she persuaded Mildred to lie down, saying when she had grown more calm, and had rested, they would speak of the matter again.

"Trust me, Millie," she said, kissing her before she left. "I will do all in my power for you, only promise me this—say nothing to any one of your love to Laurence Hawkwood, and entreat him also to be secret."

Then Helen Houghton went back to her own room, and tried to think; but her brain was too much in a whirl for the effort to prove successful.

She wondered why Sydney Brice had not had his presence announced, and with the wonder came a terror of the interview.

"I should be helpless. Even words would fail me. I should do more harm than good. I must see him; but first I must be calm, and better able to plead."

Therefore, hastily attiring herself, she left the house by a side door, and started along a retired path to Barrington.

CHAPTER V.

ROBERT LLANDELLS SPEAKS.

"THERE must certainly be something very attractive in Berkshire air," reflected Mrs. Norton one morning to her husband. "Robert came to stop three days, and has been here over treble that time, yet makes no mention of going."

"Do you wish to get rid of him, my dear?" queried Mr. Norton, glancing over his paper. "I confess I don't. He's a capital companion. Always pleasant."

"He is a dear good fellow!" remarked the sister, enthusiastically. "Only, Richard, one can't help surmising and drawing conclusions. When he came down, he said to stop a week was impossible."

"And pray what conclusions have you drawn, Katie?"

"None at present—only surmises. Richard, do you know I fancy Bob's attraction is Helen Houghton?"

"Humph! It might be. She's a deucedly handsome girl—clever, too. No nonsense about her. Has a nice little property also. It wouldn't be a bad match. Only women jump so at conclusions."

"When they have good foundation to go upon, Richard. I believe women observe more than men, and I'm sure Bob pays very little attention to any other lady when Helen Houghton is present, while he is always bringing their names up, and inquiring about them. Also, he gets quite lost in thought at times."

"He's a lawyer, my love, and, as you are aware, has several intricate cases coming on, which would account for preoccupation. He's always getting letters."

"He said," replied the wife, with acuteness, "that it was those same intricate cases that necessitated his return to New York. Why does he remain?"

"I really cannot tell, my love; you had better ask him."

Why did Robert Llandells remain? It was true that he received many letters—even telegrams, to which he often wired answers back in all speed. Therefore he was not neglecting business. Some of these communications evidently gave him satisfaction, others the reverse.

"I ought to go to town myself," he not infrequently informed himself; yet he remained. Was Helen the attraction? If so, he was not a very demonstrative lover. He spoke on commonplace subjects—never schemed for unexpected meetings—but took life apparently in a very matter-of-fact kind of way. Nevertheless there was a tone in his voice, an expression in the eye, and a touch of the hand which seemed to whisper a confession to Helen that pleased yet pained her.

On that morning when Mildred had informed her sister of her engagement to Laurence, Robert Llandells had also gone for a stroll, and had met on his way Sydney Brice. They had walked back toward Barrington together, talking of many things; among others, Paris and Vienna—cities abroad which both had visited.

Near the falls they separated. Sydney Brice went to Glen House; Robert Llandells strolled thoughtfully over the hills.

It was near noon when, proceeding down a lane in the direction of the village, he perceived Helen Houghton coming toward him. He halted. It was clear she had not perceived him. She was walking slowly; her head was bowed. How tall and graceful she was! Yet there was a sadness in her step and demeanor that touched him.

"If there is not some great and hidden care there, my legal penetration is much at fault," he pondered. "Does it rest on her alone? Is her sister cognizant of it? Hardly; she is all life and happiness. I wish I could help her; but I have no right. Even an inquiry would be an impertinence, and I would rather be silent than offend."

He had continued to advance, and Helen, hearing his step, looked up, startled. Seeing who it was, a deep blush spread over her cheek, not before, however, he had marked the sadness, the tears upon it, and how pale it was.

As he took the small hand she extended, and gazed into the wan, handsome face, for the color had quickly again died out of it, his dread of offending was forgotten, and he said, involuntarily: "Forgive me, Miss Houghton, you are ill; nay, I fear it is worse than that—you are in trouble."

The voice so full of sympathy, coming so unexpectedly, took Helen off her guard. Her lips quivered, the tears sprang to her eyes. In a second the dread of betraying the truth strengthened her nerves, and she rejoined with a forced laugh: "Yes, there is a little matter troubling me just at this moment. No one, I expect, Mr. Llandells, goes through life without something of the kind."

"Indeed, no. We lawyers should be more aware of that than anybody," he answered, adopting her manner; "not from our own experience, but the cases intrusted to our care. I am glad that yours is only a small annoyance; though— But I fear you would consider me impertinent if I finished the sentence."

"I am sure you would not intend it so," replied Helen.

"Thank you. You do me but justice, Miss Houghton, and give me courage to conclude my remark, which is that I should hardly have thought a small trouble would so affect a nature so strong and evenly balanced as yours."

She looked up at him, slightly alarmed; but he having turned to walk by her side, did not, or pretended not to perceive the glance as he continued, "Yet, at times, small troubles are more irritating than large ones. Small or

large ones, Miss Houghton, as a friend of my sister's, a friend whom she much respects, if I could aid you in any way, I should only be too honored by your accepting my services. A lawyer's advice is really of value sometimes."

Poor Helen!

How she wished she dared accept such a confidant, as, with a faint smile, she answered, "I am sure of that, Mr. Llandells; but I do not think it would be to me, in my case. There are some troubles that must be borne."

"And yours is of that nature?"

She paused; then answered, low:

"Yes, I fear so."

"No one could have the happiness of assisting to remove it from you, Miss Houghton?"

"No one."

A pause. They walked on awhile in silence. Suddenly she spoke:

"Mr. Llandells, even the little confidence I have made, may I ask, as a favor, you will regard it quite in that light?"

"As a most sacred one," he rejoined, earnestly; then, more earnestly still, moved by an abrupt impulse, took her hand, and said, "Would, Miss Houghton, you would confide in me altogether. You would make me the happiest man on earth. I would give—I would do so much to help you, to free you from suffering."

She had met his glance alarmed; then, trembling, shrunk timidly back. He proceeded:

"Even at the risk of offending you, Miss Houghton, though no thought is further from my mind, I must speak—I had better. You cannot deceive me. This is no light trouble that is weighing you down—shadowing your life, which should be so bright and joyous."

She tried faintly to check him, but there was that gentle, earnest and impassioned tone which dominated her.

"The first time I saw you, Miss Houghton—a moment I shall never forget," he went on—"I saw that you were suffering. I don't know whether it was that which attracted me toward you, but from that hour you have never been absent from my thoughts."

Again she made an effort to stay him, but the hand she lifted he imprisoned in his, and continued:

"When we met, not a change of your features, not a glance, not a tone of your voice, escaped me, and in each I read that which you were able to conceal from others. Why? Was it owing to that study of countenance common to my profession? No, I think not. It was a stronger power than that—a power that not only made me read but suffer with you, for you were suffering. The power that makes in their time every man and woman acute and penetrating—that unites heart to heart by such sensitive and subtle ties that the beat of one is the beat of the other. Miss Houghton, do you know now why I ventured to say you had a trouble—why I asked to aid you?"

"I entreat you to say no more! Oh, be silent!" she murmured, imploringly.

"No; I have said too much already not to say more. I must speak!" he remarked, fondly, fervently. "Miss Houghton—dearest Helen, I love you, and would take your trouble on myself, shielding you from every care. If you can care for me, give me that right!"

He leaned near her, holding her hand. She had partly turned from him, her head was bowed, her tears fell fast. In a moment, however, she spoke: "Mr. Llandells, I thank you. I have not words to say how deeply I feel this, but—it is impossible!"

"Impossible?"

"Yes."

A pause—a rather long one. Then he broke it.

"Forgive me," he said slowly, a pain in his voice. "Circumstances—that is, false conclusions have, I believe, made me attribute your trouble to wrong causes—causes another might be able to remove. There may be other reasons; your love may be elsewhere given—"

"My love!" she interrupted with a wan

smile and shake of the head. "No, I shall never marry—never!"

"Never?"

"Never! Love and my trouble, Mr. Llandells, have nothing in common. Now, please, believing I am grateful to you, pray let me go."

She raised her eyes pleadingly to his. He looked fixedly into them, but as yet did not release her hand.

"One instant, Miss Houghton," he said, "and I will obey. May I know if—if circumstances were not as they are, whether I might have hoped?"

"Where is the use of asking, circumstances being as they are, Mr. Llandells?" she replied, in a low tone, with averted head. "You pain me. Is it kind?"

A bright smile came to his lips. Her answer seemed to content him.

"I will not ask, then," he said. "I will only say—and trust me, the interest I feel in you, the love I possess for you, actuates the words—is it your resolve never to marry?"

"Never! I never shall!"

"Then I will make a similar declaration. Neither will I marry while you, Helen, are single!"

"Mr. Llandells?"

"Nay, more, Helen, I will never marry unless I call you wife."

"That will—can never be."

"I will live in hope," he smiled. "Until then, holding all that has passed between us in perfect secrecy, may I be—will you regard me as a friend?"

He had released her hand by this time, and standing a little from her, awaited her reply.

"I have so few," she said, sadly, "that, right or wrong, I cannot refuse that."

"Take my word, it is not wrong,"—he smiled, almost lightly. "And now, see how importunate I am! Will you grant me a favor—you cannot tell how great a one I shall regard it—if you ever find you are compelled to turn to any one for aid, for advice, will you, Helen, come to me?"

He held out his hand toward her, as if her taking it would imply consent. She hesitated a second—only a second. Why should she, so desolate, reject such a friend? She should never have the power of accepting any one's aid or advice, therefore why pain herself and him by rejecting his generous offer? She put her small, gloved hand on his broad palm, and answered, "Yes, Mr. Llandells, I promise that."

"I thank you," and slightly he touched his lips to her fingers before he released them. "I may have to go to New York shortly, but I shall soon return, Helen; I shall ever be near you. Now, good by. I feel you would prefer continuing your way alone."

"If you please. Good by," and she moved from him.

"Yet one instant," he added, it seemed almost with intentional abruptness. "Who is this Mr. Sydney Spalding who is staying at Barrington?"

The face she turned toward him was devoid of every vestige of color. Then a flush passed over it as, recovering herself, she rejoined, "Who should he be but Mr. Sydney Spalding?"

"Well, I suppose so," he laughed. "Excuse me," raising his hat, "for having delayed you, Miss Houghton, with so absurd a question; only I do not like the man."

"I am right," he added to himself, as he looked after Helen's retreating figure; "that fellow has to do with her trouble. If only I could find out all about it!"

Helen hastened back to Glen House with her new trouble. Robert Llandells loved her, and she had rejected him; she must not even think of him! Mildred's lot was a sad one; was hers much better?

"It is all growing more than I can bear—more than I can bear! It seems impossible to live beneath the burden! Why do I?" she cried as, reaching the privacy of her own room, she

threw herself, heart-sick and weary, on a chair.

Hardly had she recovered herself, and began to remove her out-door dress, when a tap came at the door.

"Come in," said Helen, believing it was Mildred, but Mrs. Airly entered.

"Ah, my dear, you have returned," she remarked. "I sent to your room about an hour ago, and found that you had started for the village."

"Yes. Did you want me?"

"Not I, my dear; but Mr. Spalding did. He had called to see you, and said he would come again this evening. I told him I thought you could see him. Was I right?"

"Perfectly, I thank you. I will see Mr. Spalding," replied Helen. "Better to get it over," she added, when Mrs. Airly had rustled away. "I will do the best I can for poor Millie; but how weary and heart sick of it all I feel!"

CHAPTER VI.

HELEN'S SACRIFICE.

MILDRED brought a very pale face to dinner that day, and Helen was little better. Mrs. Airly remarked it, but being already acquainted with the cause, did not comment upon it. During the meal, however, she stated that she had promised to spend an hour at the Winstanleys', and asked Mildred if she would not go with her.

The color fluttered into the girl's cheeks.

Anywhere beyond the boundary of Glen House there was a chance of meeting Laurence.

"What do you say, Lennie?" she questioned.

"I cannot go, Millie; I have something to do; but it would do you good," replied Helen, kindly, glad of the opportunity of seeing Sydney Brice alone without having to give a reason for so doing, and at the same moment thinking not of the artist.

So, about seven, they set out, and ten minutes later, as if Mrs. Airly had timed her departure to suit, Mr. Spalding was announced.

He entered in his usual airy fashion, and had evidently paid extra attention to his dress.

Eagerly Helen scanned his features, but saw no anger upon them.

"Does he not know?" she reflected.

How could he?

"The charming Mildred not here?" remarked Sydney Brice, glancing round.

"She has gone out with Mrs. Airly," replied Helen. "From the message you left I fancied you would prefer that our interview should be secure from interruption."

"Exactly; it will be best" (taking a chair near hers); "though of course Mildred must be made acquainted with it shortly—very shortly now."

"You mean that—"

"The time has come to inform her of who I am and what I expect of her," he answered, tapping the tips of his rather thick white fingers together. "Do you know, Miss Houghton, I imagine that I have delayed almost too long—that if I wait longer poachers will be intruding on my preserve, if they have not done so already."

He was watching her attentively, and perceived by her quick changing color that she knew to what he referred.

"I fancy," he proceeded, leaning forward, "that you, Helen Houghton, are well aware of this danger. Is it so?"

"You must speak more plainly," she replied.

"That is easily done!"—and the dark expression on his countenance did not at all improve it. "That Mildred and Laurence Hawkwood are in love! Pray, has this been a plan? Were you cognizant of it?"

Then he did know!

"No," she answered, vehemently; "or do you think I would not have used every effort to check it to save Mildred from this worst trouble of all? I never suspected it, even—

never—until to-day I heard it from her own lips."

"I believe you. But it's no less a fact that it is so. While we have been sleeping, these two young people have been meeting and billing and cooing in the glen. It must be stopped."

Helen wrung her hands, then bowed her head upon them.

"Oh!" she moaned, "it has all been a sad mistake—a mistake from the beginning, and I am to blame!"

"Exactly. A very great mistake in first trying to play hide-and-seek with me," he put in.

"And," she added, "in concealing from poor Mildred who you were when you arrived! Whatever she had felt—whatever done—could not have been so terrible as this—this misery! It will kill her!"

"Tut! At present you appear to have borne the brunt of the fight. She made the promise, and must keep it. Of her own free will she consented to be my wife if I found the way and the means to prevent her father being disgraced as a defaulter. That would have killed him. As it was, I believe the dread of such a possibility shortened his life. I had no idea that his days were so nearly ended when I let him go beyond my view to the South. There he died, and from there—foolishly as you now confess—you fled with Mildred, my affianced wife. Not well done, Miss Houghton, your father having been allowed to die a supposed honorable gentleman!"

"You are right; I know it!" said Helen, almost desperately. "Yet consider, Sydney Brice, the age she was when she gave that promise! Now she is but eighteen—"

"And I five-and-forty; yet—"

"Oh, it is not that. Girls as young have loved and made happy men even older—"

"But, you say, Mildred does not love me?"

"You know she does not. How could she when, until recently, she saw you but for a few minutes? Oh, reflect, I entreat you! Is it wise to yourself to force this marriage on? You take an unloving wife—a wife that you have learned loves another—to your hearth, there to breed misery—wretchedness! Haggard looks will meet yours! Sydney Brice, in pity not only to her future, but also to your own, reflect! Do not let this marriage be!"

"As to haggard looks, we will see about them!" he answered, with a short laugh. "Wives can be made to hear reason—which, by the way, seems to have deserted you at present. Do you know what you ask when you say do not let this marriage be?"

"Mercy!"

"Yes; but of far too expensive a nature to be entertained. Do you imagine I will consent to do all I did for your father for no return?—that I will forget all the trouble I have had to find you?—or accept as a recompense the pleasure of placing my affianced wife in Laurence Hawkwood's arms? You hardly know me if you think it. For money and trouble I will be repaid."

"Oh, do not imagine I would not have you repaid," exclaimed Helen. "But, in mercy, find some other way—not this, which must bring suffering to all! Be merciful to Mildred—release her from this promise—and day and night we will work to pay! Only let her be saved! Your heart cannot be devoid of all pity! Oh, be merciful to her!"

As she spoke, she sunk on her knees before him, and extended her clasped hands in entreaty.

He had risen from his chair, and now stood looking down upon her in admiration. The graceful figure, the passionate earnestness of the handsome features, the humble position, formed a picture that thrilled his nerves.

Mrs. Airly was right. She was a dozen times more beautiful, superior to Mildred.

"You ask," he said, "if there is no way to save your sister?"

"Yes."

"There is one."

A hopeful smile broke over Helen's face.

"Oh, how good you are!" she exclaimed.

"Wait. Hear me first," he interrupted, lifting his hand to stop her. "You may find the condition worse, more difficult of accomplishment."

"That is impossible; it could not be!" she replied.

"It will be a great sacrifice required at your hands."

"I will make it. Name it. I will be content to beg my bread, or toil for it all my life," cried Helen, earnestly, "if Mildred be released."

"There will be no need of toil."

"The condition. Oh, name it!"

"I consent to give back to Mildred her promise," remarked Sydney Brice, slowly, "to let her wed with whom she pleases, if, Helen Houghton, you will take her place, and be my wife!"

His wife!

A stifled exclamation escaped her as she shrunk back, recoiling from him.

She was overwhelmed for a space. She could but gaze at him, her breathing quick and uncertain.

"Your wife? I?" she finally gasped.

"My wife, Helen," he rejoined, quietly. "That is the only condition on which I can release Mildred."

"It is a hard one."

He slightly raised his shoulders.

"Just now you pleaded to me to have mercy on your sister. Now her happiness rests with you, not me. It is you who have to decide."

She was leaning on the seat of her chair, her face buried in her hands.

Why did she think of Robert Llandells at that moment? Why did his form rise up before her, the pressure of his fingers feel yet about hers?

"Yes," she said, at last; "I perceive that it is for me to decide. I—I cannot now; my brain is confused. Give me time."

"How long? In case you refuse, I cannot let matters go on between Hawkwood and Mildred."

"I ask but to-night. I shall have decided before morning."

"Agreed. When and where may I expect your answer?"

"At ten, in this room."

"Very well. I shall be punctual, Helen. Now I will leave you."

She made no response, but remained kneeling by the chair, her elbows on the seat, her face in her hands. She did not move until she heard the door close; then, with a low, bitter cry, sinking forward, she exclaimed, "Oh, Robert, Robert, why do I love you? Had we never met, this sacrifice would not have been impossible!"

After awhile she arose and went to her room, leaving word that her head ached, she was tired, and would not sit up for her sister's return.

But there was no rest that night for her. A hundred times she decided, to waver next moment. Never until then had she known how dear Robert Llandells was to her.

Finally, as morning dawned, she resolved unalterably. In her own love she forced herself to recognize and feel for Mildred's. Why should the penalty fall on the younger sister? Why should her heart be broken by having to renounce Laurence, necessitating cruel disclosures? She—Helen—would be called upon to renounce no one. Had she not already rejected Robert Llandells? A sacrifice must be made. Why should she not make it instead of Mildred? She would.

At ten, Mr. Sydney Brice appeared at Glen House to receive his answer. He guessed it, even as he saw Helen enter.

"Well?" he said, simply, as he placed a chair.

"I consent," she answered, not sitting down, "but with, on my side, one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you continue to retain the name you

have assumed. Did Mildred know your true one—that you are Sydney Brice—I do not think she would let me do that on which I have resolved; also that when—when we marry, it shall be quietly, and not at Barrington.”

Sydney Brice had particular reasons for these suggestions to be exceedingly agreeable to him.

“I consent to everything,” he said, “and thank you. Believe me, I hold myself fortunate in the change.”

He made as though he would have taken her hand and drawn her to him, but she shrunk quickly back.

“No,” she said quietly but firmly. “Do not tax my strength too far. I am not your wife yet.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE NARROW HILL PATH.

THE amazement in Barrington was great when Helen's engagement to Sydney Spalding was known.

“Well,” remarked Mrs. Norton, contemptuously, but with an anxious sidelong glance at her brother, “I pity her taste. The man's old enough to be her father! I think him detestable!”

“Then, Kate,” smiled Robert Llandells, as he quitted the room, “it is well for Mr. Spalding that you are not Miss Houghton.”

“How quietly he takes it!” commented the lady. “I must have been mistaken. She is not the attraction that keeps him here!”

In her own astonishment and disappointment she had not observed the startled surprise in her brother's eyes at the announcement, followed quickly by a quiver of acute pain in all the facial muscles. The smile with which he had covered his retreat from the room was transient enough.

“I knew that fellow was at the bottom of it!” he reflected, with knitted brows, on reaching his own apartment. “She never contemplated this marriage when I saw her! What can it all mean? If I could but find out! I must!”

Mildred's surprise was probably the greatest. Her blue eyes opened to their widest.

“You have accepted Mr. Spalding! You love him, Lennie!” she ejaculated.

“I am going to marry him, Millie!”

“Well, I never! I would never have believed it!” proceeded the girl. “I can now see how my love for Laurence took you by surprise, for I did not believe you cared for Mr. Spalding more than I did, if even as much.”

“My dear Millie, some things are very difficult to understand in this world,” smiled Helen, faintly. “Be content, dear, that I see no reason after all for your rejecting Laurence Hawkwood. I will be answerable to Sydney Brice. Marry him and be happy.”

“Oh, Lennie, Lennie! How good of you!—how kind!” And joyously she embraced her sister. “You are the best, the dearest sister in the world! I am so—so glad you are going to be happy too! But,” she added more gravely as she drew back, “I can't make it out! When I knew Laurence loved me, and accepted him, I was so full of joy that I did not know what to do! I felt as if made of cork, and always ready to sing and laugh, while you look so pale, so weary, Lennie!”

“It is because I am not very well, Millie, that is all. I have gone through so much lately. Besides,” smiling, “different people have different ways of showing their feelings. I never was so demonstrative as you are, dear.”

“Demonstrative!” thought Mildred. “If I had been as little so regarding Laurence, I don't fancy the idea of giving him up would have been so terrible. Yet Lennie must love Mr. Spalding, else why marry him?—why, for I feel sure that Robert Llandells likes her?”

The more Millie thought of it, the more she was puzzled. Why she did not know. Perhaps, because lately he had been more pointedly attentive; but she had rather a repugnance to

Sydney Spalding, and her curiosity excited, began quietly to watch Helen.

As to the latter, there was one ordeal through which she knew she had to go that made her tremble and shrink as with guilt—her next meeting with Robert Llandells! She must meet him! But in what fashion could she? How encounter his glance! How explain her behavior? Surely she was called upon to do so, yet what could she say that would not be false?

To her relief, she learned that Robert Llandells had gone abruptly to New York. She was glad, though she felt sure that he had done so to avoid meeting her. What wonder?—how could he respect her longer?

Before a week was over, however, she heard that he had returned, and the next day he called, with his sister, Mrs. Norton. Helen felt her color come and go, while she was thankful for the presence of other visitors.

No one, from Robert Llandells's manner, would have imagined such a conversation as that between him and Helen on the hills had ever taken place between them. Helen felt almost in doubt herself as she saw him so composed, so quiet.

A sensation, half pain, half disappointment, possessed her, and she moved toward the window. At the same moment other guests arrived. Robert Llandells seized the opportunity, and joined her.

Finding him at her side, looking up, all the sentences she had planned faded from her memory, and plaintively, apologetically, she ejaculated, “Oh, Mr. Llandells, what must you think of me? I ought to explain; I cannot!”

“No, no,” he said, gently; “there is no need of explanation, Miss Houghton; I have no right to it, I confess, though I was surprised. Still, I yet hold you to your promise, should you ever require a friend. I want now to ask you a favor—a particular favor.”

“What is it?” she asked, faintly. “Believe me, I will grant it if I can.”

“Do not let your marriage take place for six months.”

She regarded him in astonishment. He smiled.

“It is I who ought to give an explanation now, you think?” he said. “I will do so. Miss Houghton, I told you the other day, or implied it, that I would not give up hope. Will you give me this other promise before I go? My sister is signing for me.”

“I will—I promise.”

And, as if to ratify it, as on the former occasion, Helen placed her hand in his.

She found her word difficult to keep, for Sydney Brice was anxious for the ceremony to take place. He had been hanging quite long enough about, he said, to be tired of it; but in this Helen was firm. He had to yield, but in doing so showed a portion of his character that made her shudder yet more at the idea of being tied to him for life.

Until now Sydney Brice had been sneering; now his temper had broken out as black as the frown that indexed it.

“It would be a different thing if you permitted me to act the lover,” he remarked; “but you hold me off as though I were the plague.”

“To me you are worse,” she responded. “You are aware it was not love that made me consent.”

Not love! No; Mildred every day was growing more thoroughly sure of that. Then why did Lennie wed him? In one of the pleasant interviews she could enjoy without fear now with Laurence, who, by the way, had commenced her picture for the Academy, she had half taken him into her confidence.

“My own darling,” had rejoined the artist, “I believe you are worrying your pretty little head with no cause. To me, your sister seems as sensible as she is beautiful. Then why should she give herself to a man whom she does not love? This notion is absurd!”

“It seems so.”

“It is so, trust me, dearest.”

“Yet—yet—”

“Yet what?”

“Her love, Laurence, appears”—and the blue eyes were raised fondly to his—“so different to ours. We are so happy, while Lennie—”

“Is happy also, I do not doubt, in her way,” laughed the artist. “Remember, Sydney Spalding is not very young; while clever people, I fear, laugh, if they do not a little scorn, such lovers as you and I.”

“They well might envy our happiness,” she rejoined; “and that thought makes me feel more for Lennie. I wish, too, that I liked Sydney Spalding better, and certainly I wish that his name was not Sydney at all.”

“Why?” he laughed.

“Because”—vehemently, and her eyes hardened and her lips tightened—“I hate it! I think, Laurence, if Sydney had been your name, I should never have loved even you.”

“Nonsense! What's in a name, Millie! Now, really, we must go on with the picture.”

So the days went by, Millie constantly growing more convinced of the truth of her surmise concerning Lennie; Robert Llandells passing his time pretty fairly between Barrington and New York, thereby adding much to his sister's curiosity and wonderment; and Helen each day that slipped away feeling greater loathing, greater fear of Sydney Brice, and greater horror at thought of her approaching fate. It was no good wishing for death now. She gone, he would renew his claim on Mildred.

Nearly three months had passed, when, one afternoon, Helen started for a walk alone over the hills.

Lately she had grown restless, sometimes even hysterical. The confinement of the house would appear to stifle her, and her sole relief was to get away to the breezy hill-tops, and enjoy solitude amidst their picturesque wildness.

The previous night there had been heavy rains, and, though the short, sheep-cropped grass had dried, the narrow paths were slippery with mud; so she kept to the grass, and walked quickly on, regardless in what direction.

The sight of another village nestling at the feet of two hills recalled her to the distance she had come. She would be late for luncheon; therefore, turning, she retraced her steps, not perceiving a man had seen her as she stood on the hill, her figure outlined against the sky, and was following her.

The man was Sydney Brice, who had been on his usual visit for letters. He had received one, that had made him contract his brows with that dark look which had revealed so much to Helen. It ran thus:

“There is something up. Somebody, who I cannot discover, is certainly making inquiries, for the waters are becoming exceedingly troubled, while the way they flow is surely northward. Have you met any one you know, or who knows or suspects you? Be on your guard. If I were you, I would change my quarters for a while. Yours,
“COMET.”

“Something up!” had muttered Sydney Brice. “He'd never cry wolf without he saw its shadow. I've stayed here too long. I must get away; but not without Helen. Her money would be rather acceptable at the present moment. She must, she shall consent to a speedy union, or— Well, I can threaten; but at present I could hardly perform. I must remain *incog.* while I am here, if it's likely that my hiding-place is suspected.”

At that instant he had caught sight of Helen, and hastened his pace to overtake her.

He failed to do so, for she was walking fast, until she had reached the steep path that wound round the hill-side down to the glen.

Helen started violently on finding him close to her. She had been lost in a reverie, wherein Robert Llandells played a part, and had not heard Brice's step on the muddy soil.

“A fortunate meeting, my dear Helen,” he remarked. “You are the very person I was desiring to see. The path is both steep and narrow; but if we walk close there will be room.”

She drew nearer to the hill-side and further from him. He chose to read the action his own way.

"Thank you. This path I call confoundedly dangerous."

It was so, for after heavy rains many a landslide had taken place, leaving gaps concealed by fringes of long grass, while at parts the rugged, almost precipitous hill descended sheer to the river, rushing and gurgling on under the bushes beneath.

"But," continued Sydney Brice, "as we walk with our eyes open, that's of no consequence; so to why I wanted to see you. I have had letters this morning which necessitate my leaving Barrington almost immediately."

"Yes," coldly.

"They are most important. I must go."

"Well?"

"Well!" And he bit his lip to hide his rising anger at her tone. "That means, Helen, that I cannot—will not—go alone. It is not likely that I should leave you here."

"Then you, too, will have to remain."

"Indeed, I shall not! You must arrange to become my wife, privately or as you will, before a week."

"Indeed, I shall not!" she replied, with assumed firmness, and repeating his own words. "You heard my resolve—you yielded to it. Nothing—mark me—nothing shall make me change."

"We will see that!" he exclaimed, through his teeth. "Here, don't go slipping about on this confounded path. Give me your arm."

He put his out—she shrunk away.

"Do not touch me!" she exclaimed, almost with a cry. "Go on first, Sydney Brice. I—"

"Well, what?"

"I fear you!"

"And will have cause, if you try me too far!" he hissed. "Come, you are my betrothed. Take my arm, I say; obey me!"

Again he put out his hand. To any one witnessing the scene from a distance, it might have seemed that they had quarreled, and that he was seeking a reconciliation. Only Helen, who was close, saw the cruel, vindictive gleam in the small dark eyes, the fierce draw of the lips.

What she feared she knew not; but her whole being seemed to revolt—to recoil from his touch. She knew not what she did.

"I warn you, Sydney Brice!" she exclaimed. "Leave me alone, or—"

She had wildly, desperately, thrown out her hands as she spoke. Instinctively, as they nearly touched him, he stepped back—stepped quickly—forgetful of where he was—of the narrowness of the path.

His foot came upon nothing more stable than the fringe of long, rank grass.

He gave one loud, terrifying cry, echoed by a scream from Helen—threw up his arms—clutched frantically in the air—then disappeared over the edge.

For a few seconds, which appeared to her an age, Helen Houghton stood petrified. All had occurred so rapidly that she could not realize the truth.

Then she sprang forward, and strove to look down the rugged side where Sydney Brice had vanished.

Her head, however, swam too much. The horror of his fate was upon her, and only by kneeling, crouching on the path, firmly grasping the strong tufts of grass, could she succeed in gazing down the precipitous descent.

Nothing met her view but a crushed, torn space among the bushes at the foot. Nothing fell on her ear but the rushing gurgle of the swollen, rapidly-flowing river. Not a cry—not a sound.

Was he killed? He must be! Stunned first, then drowned. To escape would be a miracle.

Giddy—sick—she drew back; and sat down on the hill-side. A nervous trembling was upon her; yet at the same time was blended with her terror the feeling that probably she was freed of Sydney Brice forever. But at what price?

Was she the cause of his fall? Would the

world consider her so? All had occurred so hurriedly. Still, she fancied her hands had not even touched him. What if she were accused of his death?

She looked up hastily. There were quick, light footsteps coming up the path. It was Mildred; her visage stony white, her eyes dilated with horror.

"Oh, Helen, Helen!" she cried, in terrified reproach; "what have you done?—how could you?"

"Done?—I?" ejaculated her sister mechanically, regarding her in wonder.

"If you did not love him, and I am sure you did not, why had you promised to marry him?" proceeded Mildred, wildly, and wringing her hands. "Was there no way but this to free yourself? Oh, Lennie, it is terrible! You have killed him."

"I?" came the reply, in low, hollow accents. "I did not kill him; he—he fell over by accident."

"Oh, Helen, I would I could believe it; but, but—"

"But what? Speak!"

"I cannot speak of it again! Can you deny it?"

"Yes,"—and Helen rose up; "I never touched him. He would have dared to put his hand on me; I threw out mine to prevent him. He stepped back. I think he believed I would have struck him. He was the author of his own fate!"

Mildred's countenance remained of the same expression.

"Why do you not speak?" broke in Helen, irritably, desperately. "You—you dare not disbelieve me!"

"No," answered Mildred, but avoiding her glance; "I will not. Then, Helen, what mystery is this? Why do you accept Sydney Spalding? You did not love him—I know you did not."

"I hated him!"

"Hated him?"

"Hated him as I never before hated mortal—loathed him!" burst in Helen, passionately.

"Oh!" gasped Mildred, shrinking away; "yet, hating, you bound yourself to him! He is with you on this narrow path—and he is dead! What will the world say?"

"What will you say?"

"That you are my sister; and I will believe no wrong of you. Yet, Helen, you must explain this mystery before—before we can be again that which we always have been to each other."

Mildred suspected her. She saw it. Had it, then looked so much as if she had thrust him over! Yet Mildred, for whom she had sacrificed everything, to be so ready to believe!

"You want an explanation," she remarked, with a bitter smile; "you shall have it! Do you know who Sydney Spalding is, or was?"

shuddering.

"Who should he be, but—"

"Sydney Brice!"

Mildred uttered a cry of terror.

"Oh, Helen, Helen—no!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; I knew it from the day we rescued him from the river! For your sake I entreated him to wait, and not immediately make his presence known to you!—for your sake I consented to become his wife in your place, that you might marry Laurence!"

Everything was made clear to Mildred by these words. The change in Helen ever since the accident of the bridge; her fits of depression; her horror on learning of her love and engagement to Laurence; then her sudden consent and announcement of her own engagement to Sydney Spalding. While Mildred had been so happy, she had borne the weight, endured the fearful consequences of this secret.

"Oh, Lennie," she cried, in deep contrition, as she threw herself on her sister's neck, "forgive me! I never guessed it. How could I? And yet how unkind to you I must have seemed!"

"No, dear," said Helen, soothingly; "it made me irritable, Millie, but I never blamed you."

"No; you were too good, too generous," exclaimed the other. "But I blamed you, Lennie—I, when you were doing all this for me!" And drawing back, she regarded her sister at arm's length. "In confidence, do you mean that you did not push Sydney Brice over?"

"I swear I did not, Millie!"

"Then in your place I would have done so," said Mildred, resolutely. "If I had only guessed who Sydney Spalding really was, I would have thrust him over a hundred times."

"Hush, hush, dear!" exclaimed Helen, startled. "No, Millie, you would not. But, remember, neither of us must know who—who this man was."

"No. But, Lennie, will it not seem strange if we do not seek help for him—if we do not strive ourselves to aid him? Supposing he be not dead?"

"True. I had forgotten that. Still, he must have fallen into the river, and hear how rapidly it flows. But I will go down. Will you come?"

"Of course, Lennie. Do not think that I will let you have any trouble now unshared by me."

In silence, a dull fear checking the beat of their hearts, the two made their way back to the path that led down to the river. The way at this part was not a foot wide, having been formed only by the feet of adventurous tourists. Bushes shaded it, from the base of which hung festoons of the graceful maidenhair ferns. Along this the sisters proceeded until they had reached the spot where, by the broken bushes, they knew Sydney Brice must have fallen.

There was not a sign. Only the yellow, swollen river flowed rapidly on. Helen and Mildred looked at each other.

"If help would ever have been of any avail," whispered Millie—"if it could have reached him in time, Lennie, which was not likely, it is too late now."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN IN THE BROWN COAT.

NOT all that day was Sydney Brice's absence noticed. Strangers at Barrington were accustomed to take long, untimed walks across the picturesque country, and Sydney Brice had been much in the habit of doing so. Laurence Hawkwood might have wondered a little; but he had received a little note from Glen House saying that he must put off his visit there that day; so, for consolation, he had taken sketching apparatus and camp-stool, and set off sketching. He returned to a late tea, and, tired, went off to bed. When morning came, however, he heard from the people of the hotel of Sydney Spalding's non-return, and felt much surprised. He had never been absent for a night before.

"He must have gone further than he intended," remarked Laurence, attacking the eggs and ham, "and wisely stayed where he was instead of risking coming back after dark. There's no danger, I suspect, about here, eh, landlord?"

"Only in this way, sir. We have had some pretty big storms which make the narrow hill paths just that unsafe and slippery at times that it ain't easy to walk on 'em. Then if a person gets a fall, there's no knowing where he may stop: some of the hills are so steep, you see. As to danger, I think you found that out yourself, sir, up at the Glen."

"Yes, that's true!" exclaimed Laurence, springing up. "Why the poor fellow might have been lying all night at the foot of some hill, with a broken arm or leg, beyond all help. We certainly should make some inquiry, landlord."

"I have, sir, and also took the liberty of sending up to Glen House; but nobody's seen nor heard nothing of the gentleman."

"Then we must make an exploring party across the hills. Half a dozen will be enough, and I'll be one," said the artist, growing excited. "Each can take a path, and certainly one of us must succeed in getting some news of

him. I know he started in the direction of Richfield. I'll take that way."

The search party was speedily arranged, and it set out. Meanwhile the news of Sydney Brice's disappearance had spread through the neighborhood.

Matters had apparently gone on as usual at Glen House during the previous afternoon. The terrible secret in the sisters' possession had forced them to conceal their inward suffering under a mask of ease and cheerfulness.

Only when the night had come, and all but they two slept, Millie stole to Helen's room, and then they wept and planned together.

Millie's repentance for the suspicions she had harbored against this sister, who had sacrificed herself for her, was deep, sincere. She took the place of comforter, and petted and consoled Helen through the weary hours, though her own heart was breaking as she thought of Laurence Hawkwood, who henceforth could be nothing to her.

Before dawn she went back to her room, that she might not be detected by Mrs. Airly.

"Remember, darling," had whispered Millie, "however painful it may be, we must so behave as to avoid attracting suspicion. Lie down; try to get a little rest; or you will look even more pale than you always have been lately, my poor, brave, kind dear."

"I will, Millie. Trust me; I will do my best."

And when alone she threw herself on the bed and strove to sleep. But it was useless. Her eyes were heavy, yet a painful dilation was in them that seemed to prevent their closing.

An hour or so had thus passed, when Mildred came swiftly into the room, closing the door behind her.

"Millie, what is it?" ejaculated her sister.

"Nothing to frighten you, Lennie. For pity's sake, do not look so scared! I have only come to warn you. They have been sending from the hotel to inquire whether we know anything of Mr.—Mr. Spalding"—Helen shivered; "because he—he did not return last night."

"Oh, Millie!"

"Hush, hush! Lennie, you must not give way! Reflect upon the consequences!" implored Mildred. "I heard them as I stood at the corridor window over the entrance. Mrs. Airly was there. She will soon be here to tell us about it. Oh, Lennie dear, be brave; try to act your part before that woman, for I know not why I dislike and mistrust her! Laurence hints that she should never have been here—"

"What do you mean, Millie?"

"I cannot tell you now, as I must not remain. Should she find us together—talking, who can tell?—she might even suspect that—Now, Lennie, courage!—courage!"

And quickly she left the room again. Should she go to her own? That might be suspicious. It was not her custom to pass any part of the morning there. No; she would make an effort, and go to the drawing-room. She did more; she took the first piece of music that laid near, sat at the piano, and forced herself to play it.

It is difficult to fathom the strength at times of which these apparently gentle, soft natures—these fair, girlish-featured women are capable.

Mildred's warning had not come too soon. Hardly had she quitted Helen than Mrs. Airly appeared, much alarmed and agitated with the intelligence. Her own excitement made the girl's part easier to play; while Mrs. Airly was far too much behind the scenes to be surprised that Helen did not fall into tears of distress, and be overwhelmed by grief at the disappearance of him to whom she was betrothed.

The first search-party having returned unsuccessful, another was organized by Laurence Hawkwood, who believed, besides a sense of humanity, that he was doing Helen service. He had ascertained that Sydney Brice had visited Richfield on the morning of his disappearance,

but where or in which direction he had gone afterward no one knew.

He had had letters at the post-office; yet, if they had summoned him from Barrington, it was not probable he would have gone, leaving his valise behind him.

A week of great excitement in the neighborhood and torturing anxiety to Helen and Mildred, passed. Then something like a clew to Sydney Brice's fate was discovered. Far down the river, entangled among some bushes, a hat was found, inside of which was written "S. Spalding."

Laurence examined it, and identified it as the hat of the missing man.

The find caused the river banks to be further searched, when, among some foamy mud, a glove was found, which also proved to have belonged to Sydney Spalding. There could be small doubt now as to his fate. He must by some accident have fallen into the river, which, in its swollen state, had whirled him away beyond hope of rescue to the sea.

That decided, the affair began to fade from the minds of all in Barrington save those of Helen, Mildred, and Mrs. Airly.

The knowledge of how and by whose means, though accidentally, Sydney Brice had met death, weighed heavily upon the two sisters. The terror ever haunted them lest the truth should be discovered. They began at times to repent the silence their fear had made them keep. How would it be construed if ever it became known?

The change that had long come upon Helen now stole gradually over Mildred. Her face lost its brightness, her voice its gayety, her step its elasticity. There had been no crime, yet its shadow appeared to be over them.

"I wish, Lennie, we could get away from here," she said one day, with a sigh. "Can't we go to some quiet place abroad?"

"We could, Millie; but what about Laurence?"

The delicate lips quivered before they replied, "It will be long before we two wed, Lennie—if we ever do."

"Why do you say that, dear?" ejaculated Helen, in surprise.

"Because it's true. Lennie, do you think I would marry Laurence with this secret kept from him? And how shall I ever tell him? When dare I? Not for a long time yet."

Helen was silent. As Mildred acted, so she in her place would act. But the fact came like a blow upon her.

"In trying to do for the best, I seem to have done harm," she remarked, at last. "What a cruel fate pursues us! But, Millie, do not despair, dear. Wait—let us hope. Who can tell what may happen? We will go abroad, if you like."

No less a change had come over Mrs. Airly than over Mildred, only of a different nature. For the first few days her anxiety and agitation were so great as to surprise the sisters, even occupied as they were by their own trouble. Then her manner changed; she became silent, her visage hardened, she glided about the house with furtive, suspicious looks.

Laurence Hawkwood began to feel too much was being made of the matter. Similar accidents had occurred before, unfortunately, and, save in the case of Helen Houghton, Sydney Spalding had not been very much liked; yet a depressing cloud seemed to be weighing down everybody—even Mildred, usually so light-hearted and merry. Of course she felt for her sister; but that could not account for all the change, especially as over and over again she had declared to him her belief that Helen did not love Spalding.

"This state of things must not continue," reflected the artist. "Surely, as Millie's future husband, I have a right to interfere. She is getting pale and thin, while Glen House has the dreary aspect of a convent. I shall go over there this morning, and see to it."

He set out, dispersing as he quitted the hotel a little group of children, who yet found interest in gazing up at the window where the dead

man had slept, and where yet remained his effects which Mrs. Airly, as Sydney Spalding's friend, and Helen, as his betrothed, had forbidden to be touched.

On the road the artist met Robert Llandells, walking and in earnest converse with a man in a brown coat, speckled trowsers, and soft hat; Seeing Laurence, the lawyer separated from his companion, who went on, and came and joined the artist.

"I did not know you were again at Barrington said Laurence Hawkwood.

"I came last night," replied Robert Llandells.

"Of course you have heard the news of the accident we have had? It has been in all the papers," said the artist.

"You mean the disappearance of Mr. Sydney Spalding?"

"I should say death," put in Laurence.

"Of course you would," laughed Robert Llandells. "Circumstantial evidence proves him dead, but our profession always gives the doubt, you know. I suppose nobody very much regrets him here?"

It was certain Robert Llandells did not. He seemed, for one usually of so sedate and legal a bearing, in exceedingly good spirits.

"It threw a cloud over the place."

"Sudden death always does. I dare say people vaguely feel it may be their case one day. How"—he paused, then continued—"have they taken it up at Glen House?"

"It has been a great shock—a very great shock."

"Humph! But not one, I suspect, from which Miss Houghton will find it impossible to recover?"

Laurence glanced at his companion; his face had resumed all its gravity.

"I'd lay any odds," he thought, "that this fellow does love Helen, and is uncommonly glad Sydney Spalding is out of the way." Then he added, aloud, "I suspect not. What such a handsome girl as she could see in him to love and accept passes my comprehension."

"It is at all times difficult to understand a woman. Are you going to Glen House shortly?"

"I am on my way there now."

"Will you take my compliments and best wishes? I know I ought to call; but, at present, I am not able."

With that, they parted; Laurence his way, Robert Llandells to Barrington. Near its entrance he came upon the man in a brown coat, talking—it seemed, indeed, like flirting—with the pretty waitress of Glen House; for since the advent of Mrs. Airly, the staff of servants had been increased.

He paid no heed to the lawyer, the latter none to him; but on reaching the main street, Robert Llandells found interest enough in the store until the man in the brown coat made his appearance. The lawyer was standing at the stationer's door when the man came sauntering down the street and entered the stationer's which was also the post-office.

This reminded Llandells that he required some postal-cards, and he, too, entered, standing a little aside while the man was served.

"A stamp, please, miss," remarked the man to the female attendant, "and be so kind as to tell me if the post's gone out? If so, I shan't be a fellow of my word, for I have promised my young woman to be in time with this letter."

"Doesn't go out for five minutes yet," was the response, as the stamp was thrown, with that politeness proverbial to post-office attendants, through the pigeon-hole. "Now, sir, what's for you?"

The man in the brown coat, preparing the stamp for adhesion, moved aside to make room for the lawyer who, receiving the postal cards and coming away, found the man filling up the doorway, inspecting the sky.

"Beg pardon, sir!" he exclaimed, civilly, moving aside; "fear I'm stopping up the gang-way. I was just looking at the weather. Sorry, but I can't understand it like you

Americans. Wish I could, for there's a journey I fancy I ought to make, but am rather in doubt. The sky's a bit cloudy in that direction."

"It is much clearer, I imagine, than it has been," replied Robert Llandells, carelessly. "I think the clouds are dispersing. In your case I should not hesitate; I should go."

"Thank you, sir. I'll take your advice."

And they each went separate ways.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHT.

MEANWHILE, Laurence, on reaching Glen House, had found Mildred in the garden; indeed, having seen his approach, she had come out to meet him.

He felt a bitter heart-pang as he looked at her. The brightness of her eyes had gone, her cheek had lost its color, and was sadly wan.

"Oh, Millie, my darling!" he exclaimed, in great concern; "this will never do. For my sake, dear, you must not thus give way. Why should you? You never liked Sydney Spalding?"

"No; I have small regret for him," answered Mildred, with an effort at a smile. "So far, I will not be a hypocrite; but the circumstances attending his—his accident have proved a great shock to both Helen and myself."

"To Helen naturally, darling; but why should you feel it so? There is one, indeed," he laughed, "if it be not wrong to say so, who is not sorry that Sydney Spalding is removed."

"Oh, Laurence!"

"Yes; Robert Llandells. He's down here, and looks quite in excellent spirits. He sent all manner of kind messages, apologizes for not yet calling, but hopes to see you soon. Do you know, Millie, I am more and more convinced he loves your sister."

"Loves Helen? I hope not, Laurence!" exclaimed Mildred, with a start.

"Hope not? Why?" asked the artist, amazed.

"Pon my word, darling, I think poor Spalding's death has turned the heads of all the people I care for in Barrington. Did you not suggest such a suspicion yourself, and the pleasure it would have given you?"

"Yes, Laurence, I know," replied Mildred, confusedly. "That was a long time ago."

"I don't see how that affects the case, dear. Llandells is as pleasant and gentlemanly a fellow now as then."

"Yes; but Laurence, I feel—I am certain that Helen will never marry—never!"

"Oh, nonsense! That is what she thinks now, perhaps; but time, which heals all wounds—"

"Please, Laurence," broke in Millie, pleadingly, "don't talk any more about it. It is a painful subject to me."

He saw, with some surprise, how greatly it was so by her countenance; her lips trembled, tears filled her eyes.

"I can't make it out," remarked Laurence Hawkwood, a trifle testily. "I almost begin to envy Spalding, seeing the regret that is felt for him."

"Oh, Laurence, don't say that! Regret him! I do not. Oh, I could not, if—if you only knew!"

And the tone of her lover breaking down her courage, she burst into tears.

"Dear Millie—my love!" cried the artist, putting his arm about her, and trying to draw her to him; "what is the matter? You are in trouble, a trouble that I am sure Sydney Spalding's death could never have caused. Do not, darling, deceive me. How could I, who love you so, who can read your every expression, be mistaken? Can you love me, Millie, and keep any care that you are suffering from my knowledge?"

Mildred drew shrinkingly away from him, as she replied, "Laurence—dear Laurence, do not doubt my love. Any thing but that. Yes; I have a trouble—a great one. But I may not—must not tell you now! Will you be patient with me?"

"Patient with you, Millie? How can I be

when you possess a trouble I may not share?" he answered.

"You shall know it some day, but not yet. That you must know it one day, is evident, Laurence, because I cannot become your wife until you do."

She looked at him pleadingly; taking her hands, he gazed at her; then said, "I cannot understand, Millie. I am bewildered. We were both so happy, and now—this mystery! Say, had Sydney Spalding any thing to do with it?"

"Laurence," she murmured, "be generous, and do not question me. The tone of your voice—for you spoke just now as if you were hurt—made me say that which I had not intended to. Accept it in confidence. It was my full intention to go away from here saying nothing—"

"Go away! How, Mildred, without making me aware of your purpose?"

"No, no," she hastily said; "you would have known. I referred to this trouble. But I was weak and silly. All that I at present can add is that no disgrace rests on either Helen or myself. The trouble is not that. It is one that commenced long ago. When we are away from here—grown calmer and more at ease—I—I will tell you. You then shall judge. I cannot say more now. Will you, dear Laurence, trust me until then?"

"Trust you! Do you not know, Millie, that if I could not do so life would be worthless to me? Do not say another word, only promise to let me help you when you are free to ask my aid."

He held his arms toward her, and she no longer shrunk from his embrace. In a moment he said:

"So you are going from here, love?"

"Yes; somewhere abroad."

"I am glad. You want change. That will, I trust, bring the roses back to your cheeks, dearest. Where do you go?"

"That is not yet decided," she answered. "We think to some quiet place in the north of Italy, but have many things to arrange and prepare first."

"When you go I may come at times and see you? You will not forbid that?"

"No; but do not come at once, Laurence. Believe me, we shall speedily get again like our old selves if for awhile we are alone."

"Every wish of yours, Millie, shall be obeyed," he replied; making, however, this mental resolve—that wherever she went he, though unseen, would be near to watch over her. "Does Mrs. Airly go with you?"

"No; certainly not," replied Mildred. "I do not like her, Laurence, neither does Lennie. By going away we shall have an excuse for getting rid of her."

"I am very glad of it," remarked the artist. "She seems to have filled her office pretty well here, but was not the style of person who ought to have been chosen as your chaperon—the friend—if, indeed, your friend who recommended, could have known little of her."

Mildred made no rejoinder, but changed the subject. She by this time had learned from Helen who had been Mrs. Airly's introducer, and why she had been placed near her.

Three evenings after this Laurence, coming home through the gloaming, was startled by perceiving a faint light in the room that had belonged to Sydney Spalding. He was sure it was a light; yet in a second almost it had gone. Could it have been a reflection?

He turned, looking in every direction. No; as far as he could judge there was nowhere from whence it could come. Besides, it was not such as a light would be on glass, but dimmed by a blind. He was perfectly sure he had not been mistaken. Still, it might have been the landlord who had gone in, for the door was locked and he kept the key. He hoped it was so, and that no one had been tampering with the valises, which were to be taken in a day or two now to Glen House, and the room given up, all hope of the owner's return being abandoned.

Hastening his steps, the artist reached the hotel. At the door of it, smoking a cigar, stood the man wearing the brown coat whom he had seen in Robert Llandells's company. He made way for him to pass; but turned his head quickly, catching the words addressed by Laurence to the Landlord.

"Was it you just now in the room to the right of mine?"

"The room to the right of yours, sir? Why, that's the locked room!" exclaimed the landlord. "No, sir, nobody's been in there."

"I'm sure I saw a light there," persisted Laurence Hawkwood, "as I came down the hill-road."

"Couldn't have been, really, sir. There's the key, hanging up where you see it now just inside the bar," remarked the landlord, "and I've never been out of there, only when I showed this gentleman"—for the man in the brown coat had drawn a step nearer—"to a room on the left of yours. Pr'aps, sir, you made a mistake?"

"Scarcely, for the left hand window has a festoon of honeysuckle over it, and I saw a bright light in that one. No; I feel certain I made no mistake. You see that baggage, landlord, has never been opened; we have no idea of the contents, whether valuable or otherwise. I trust no one has managed to get in and tried to tamper with them."

"Excuse my speaking, sir," said the man in the brown coat, "but hotel or inn thieves are common enough to us foreigners."

"They're not in Barrington," put in the landlord, feeling that he ought to be indignant at such an aspersion being put upon his house. "Besides, there's the key; they couldn't have got in without that."

"I don't see much difficulty if the key always hangs there," remarked the man in the brown coat, quickly; "that is, if a city thief intended to enter the room you mention."

"City or country thief, a man couldn't get in without a key."

"No, but he'd soon get one," laughed the man in the brown coat. "It would be as easy as possible. Just look here; I'll show you. Supposing this piece of cake"—taking a piece from under a glass cover on the bar—"were a piece of wax. Well, while your back's turned or you're called away he reaches forward like this"—suiting action to word—"takes the key, presses it on the wax—the work of a few seconds in his practiced fingers—hangs back the key before you can say Jack Robinson, and has only to have a key made to the wax impression to enter the room he wants to rifle."

The landlord watched and listened with wide-open, staring eyes. Laurence Hawkwood's, on the contrary, had contracted curiously.

"How do you know all this?" exclaimed the former, suspiciously.

"From being a traveler, and reading the papers, which, my friend, would make you as wise as I, if you liked to do the same. Why, it's an every-day occurrence," laughed the man in the brown coat. "But if this gentleman feels so sure he saw a light in the room, I don't you think it would be wise to see if the baggage is all safe there?"

"That's true; but," added the landlord, "if anybody was up-stairs, you must have heard 'em."

"That seems so; still, I heard no one while I was there, except myself. But precaution is the mother of security, so you'd better make sure."

The landlord led the way, the two followed. The room was found apparently just as it had been left. The man in the brown coat tilted one of the valises, and felt the lock.

"All secure," he remarked. "And a good lock, too, it seems."

As he replaced it he slightly lost his balance, necessitating his placing his hand on the floor not to fall prone. Recovering himself instantly, he rose up, but in his fingers he had recovered also a crooked piece of strong, slender iron.

"Confounded careless of me leaving it!" he muttered.

When satisfied, they withdrew from the room, the artist having to confess that he must have been mistaken. Falling a little back out of the landlord's hearing, he whispered:

"If I am not mistaken in this, as in the light, you are a detective."

"Right, this time, Mr. Hawkwood," replied the man. "I don't mind owning it to you, sir, for I know you are safe; I have Mr. Llandell's word for that. I'm down here in reference to the great jewel robbery case."

"You don't mean that any of the fellows are in this direction?"

"Hush, if you please, Mr. Hawkwood! I can't at present say more; p'raps I've said too much now. Good-night!" And leaving Laurence at the door of his room, he passed down the stairs, lighted a fresh cigar at the bar, and went out.

He bent his steps toward a narrow lane running at the back of some half dozen handsome detached gardens; gates from the latter led into the lane, and in one garden was constructed a picturesque and substantially built summer-house.

A light was burning in it; perceiving which the detective was immediately seized by a troublesome cough. The gate in a few seconds was opened, and a gentleman, looking into the lane, said, in a low tone: "Is that you, Kendal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in, my good fellow."

The detective did so, and followed into the summer-house. The light of the lamp burning on a table, littered with papers and writing materials, falling on his conductor, showed him to be Robert Llandells.

"Well," he inquired, as he sat down, motioning the other to a chair; "what success?"

"Complete, sir," answered the detective. "As I planned, I got into the room to-night. Can't be a shadow of doubt now, I reckon. Here are copies of some of the papers."

He placed those to which he had referred on the table. Robert Llandells, taking them eagerly, scanned them by the lamplight.

"Doubt, Kendal? No; certainty!" he cried, triumphantly. "Victory at last—at last! Bravo!"

CHAPTER X.

CHECKMATED.

AUTUMN tints were beginning to give a different beauty to the glen, offering effects which might have given Laurence Hawkwood plenty of excuses to linger had he needed them; but, somehow, he had lost interest in the falls. He, instead, was hinting at speedily taking departure, and only lingered to learn from Mildred to what part of Italy they intended to proceed.

It had taken Helen some time to decide. She, like Millie, longed to be away from a spot so full of terrible memories, yet seemed to lack courage to depart.

Finally, however, it was arranged one evening as the sisters sat in the gloaming.

"I am glad it is decided," said Helen. "Lately, action has felt so great a trouble to me; yet I think if I stayed the winter here I should go mad."

"Then, Lennie, by all means let us depart. This place, I own, to me, is very gloomy. I used to like the twilight, now I shudder at it."

"Shudder! Millie, when I have watched the gray purple mists creep up the glen in the strange fashion that they do, I have sometimes imagined that I saw him amidst them, and I have started up and fled."

"Oh, Lennie, don't; you frighten me!" said Mildred, shrinking near her. "Why should you think that?"

"Because I know that, though I never intended to injure him, but for me Sydney Brice would have been living now; and that, though innocently, I was the cause of his death haunts me day and night."

"Lennie, this is weakness—mere nervousness!" Mildred exclaimed. "When away from

here, dear, it will leave you. Believe me, you are in no way to blame. I wish we could go to-morrow."

"We will, Millie, within the week. Now I have determined, I am anxious to be gone," responded Helen.

"We shall have to tell Mrs. Airly."

"Of course. I shall fully compensate her for the short notice—"

"And hope never to see her again," said Mildred. "By the way, Lennie," she proceeded, glad to find any subject to divert her sister from graver thoughts, "I never told you why Laurence said she ought never to have been here."

"No. Why? Does he know her?"

"Only by sight, as, he says, in New York many do. He was quite startled when he first saw her here. Learning from me, however, that she had been introduced by a friend, he felt that he had no right to interfere. But when we were engaged, he told me."

"What, Millie? Who is she?"

Mildred, before replying, cast a glance around the room, darkening rapidly with the evening shadows. They lurked so about the far end that the girl did not observe that the dark walnut door was ajar, and that a face, its whiteness shrouded in a lace shawl, was near it.

Believing in their privacy, Millie, but slightly lowering her tone, answered, "Laurence says she was a second or third-rate actress at a New York theater, during which she was hardly of the best repute. Finally, she married a Mr. Airly, the owner of—of a place where people sing. I don't know what he called it; but attached was a gambling-saloon. Her husband died suddenly, when Mrs. Airly returned to the stage for a while; but, finally, again quitted it."

"And this was the woman Sydney Brice recommended to us?" remarked Helen, indignantly, as she thought of her pretty, innocent sister.

"Never mind, Lennie! We shall soon now be rid of her. The people of Barrington will know nothing about her, for Laurence will keep his knowledge to himself; and, after all, she has done us no harm."

The head at the door had been eagerly bent forward listening, but Mildred, almost unconsciously, had dropped her voice too low to be audible. Now, however, she raised it.

"There is no need for us to part other than friendly, Helen. Neither must we appear to be working in an underhanded fashion. When will you tell her of our intended departure?"

"At once. Let us ring for lights, then ask her to come here."

"There is no necessity, Helen Houghton. I am here already!"

The voice came out of the gloom and startled the sisters, who, turning, beheld standing within a few feet of them the woman of whom they had been speaking.

Mrs. Airly was pale, and had an angry, determined look. There was a tone in her voice that aroused Helen, and she replied rather haughtily.

"You have come abruptly upon us, Mrs. Airly, but your presence is welcome. We have a communication to make—"

"I am aware of its nature, Miss Houghton!" broke in Mrs. Airly.

"Then, madam," said Helen, rising with some dignity, "you have been guilty of eaves-dropping! In that case I have no more to say."

"But in that case, Helen Houghton, I have! Your purpose is to quit Barrington, and I say you shall not!"

"Shall not?" ejaculated Helen, indignantly.

Mrs. Airly waved her contemptuously aside.

"What, madam, do you mean by this behavior?" remarked Helen. "Lately your conduct has been most peculiar; but this exceeds all that has passed. I have told you—or, rather, by listening you have heard—that it is my intention to leave Glen House almost immediately."

"And I have told you, Helen Houghton, that you shall not. Attempt to leave this place, and I will have you arrested!"

"Arrested!" exclaimed both Helen and Mildred.

"Yes; for the murder of Sydney Spalding!"

Helen tottered back, with a cry. Mildred made a half-step in front as if to protect her. She was very white, and a fierce, defiant gleam was in her eyes.

"It's false!" she exclaimed. "Woman, you know it is!"

"I know it is not," cried Mrs. Airly. "Let her deny it if she can. He met her on the path coming from Richfield. They quarreled, or had words, and she pushed him so that he fell into the swollen river beneath. She dare not deny it, for I can bring, if necessary, a witness to prove my assertion!"

"I do deny it!" ejaculated Helen, rising up. "It is false!"

"Let the world believe so, if it can," laughed Mrs. Airly, bitterly. "You have been, and are, my prisoner, Helen Houghton. Remain here quietly, and at present I will hold my hand; seek to leave this place, and I will act as I have threatened."

"You dare not!" said Mildred, trembling with alarm and anger. "What is Sydney Spalding to you?"

"My brother," responded Mrs. Airly. "Yes; now you know why I have said what I have."

"What you have said is false!" interrupted Helen. "If you were acquainted with—"

"Everything? Exactly. I know why you would have desired Sydney's death. Do you think, when I reveal all this to the world, that though it may blame him it will hold you guiltless of his death? Guiltless—if you had been that—if his fall had been an accident, why have you been silent when all Barrington was wondering, searching, and surmising at his fate? Why did you permit Laurence Hawkwood to organize search parties when you knew that the man they sought was lying in the river, or had been carried to the sea? Your secrecy confirms your guilt."

"What—what is the meaning of this?"

The voice that sounded in the room asking the question was firm, ringing, and clear. Helen glanced quickly up; then, with a piteous cry, yet one of relief, sprung erect, and running toward the speaker, dropped, before he could prevent her, on her knees at his feet as she exclaimed, "Robert Llandells, you bade me, when I needed a friend, to call on you. Aid me now! Save me from this fearful woman! That which she says is not true!"

"It is true! I will have you, Helen Houghton, arrested for the murder of Sydney Spalding before dawn!"

"Your trouble, madam," replied Robert Llandells, "will be thrown away."

"And pray how so, Mr. Llandells?" haughtily.

"Because Mr. Sydney Brice, *alias* Spalding, is alive, and in the custody of the law!"

"Arrested!" ejaculated Mrs. Airly, recoiling.

"Sydney Brice!" cried Helen, in amaze.

"Is not dead, as Mrs. Airly very well knows," said Robert Llandells, quietly. "When he fell over the hill-side, Miss Houghton, owing to the bushes into which he rolled, and his being of a self-possessed nature, he escaped with but few bruises. This circumstance, and a knowledge that the law was at his heels—the law from which he was hiding here as Sydney Spalding—the idea occurred that his safety might be easily secured could he make the law believe him dead. For that purpose he crept quietly away, concealed by the bushes of the river bank, and when far enough, fastening his hat among some weeds that his fate might be put beyond all doubt. I, however, was not to be deceived by the ruse—"

"You!" gasped Mrs. Airly.

"The first moment that I saw Sydney Spalding, despite the change he had made in his appearance, I suspected his identity with Sydney Brice, who was concerned in the great

gold robbery. My difficulty was to prove it. To aid me, I employed a skillful detective, and the result is, Mrs. Airly, that Mr. Sydney Brice is now in custody."

"Alive! He is alive!" cried Helen.

"He is, indeed!"

Helen uttered a cry, and fell senseless on the floor.

Robert Llandells stooped quickly, and tenderly raised her in his arms, while Mildred ran instantly to her sister's help. They placed her on a chair; then, as they turned to seek restoratives, saw that Mrs. Airly had quitted the room.

In one of the rooms of a private house, situated in a New York suburb, was Sydney Brice, somewhat haggard, with the dye sadly requiring renewing on his mustache and hair.

Before him, calm and legal, sat Robert Llandells. A candle burned between them; while on the outside landing lounged the detective Kendal.

"Well, Mr. Brice, you now know my terms," said the lawyer. "You cannot call them hard."

"It's something like compounding felony, isn't it?"

"That is my affair!" with a slight shrug. "You would be the only witness against me!"

"Well, Mr. Robert Llandells," with a fierce scowl, "a man would do much, and suffer much for revenge."

"But the suffering in your case would be penal servitude for life," remarked the lawyer, quietly. "In my experience I have heard many a man vow vengeance against his judge or the plaintiff, and vow what he would do when he came out of prison, but I have never heard of one who ever kept his word."

"But it wouldn't be penal servitude for life," rejoined Sydney Brice. "I was the least in it."

"Still, I fancy we could twist it into a life-conviction. But if not, in seeking proofs of this, Mr. Brice, I have come across others. Do you remember the race in 18—?" and the lawyer leaned slightly over the table. "Do you remember a fellow named Jack Staples, who got access to the favorite's stable before the race morning?" Sydney Brice became ashy white. "Do you recollect how you procured the money with which you paid the debts of the foolish trusting man, Anthony Houghton, whom you under a mask had helped to fleece and ruin? Mr. Sydney Brice, I have so much to bring against you that had you two lives it would be penal servitude for both."

"Your price?" muttered the other.

"That paper which gives you the claim on the Misses Houghton."

"And in return?"

"Kendal sees you on board a vessel bound for Spain. When it has sailed, your accomplices, whose names I have, will be arrested. If you return, you too will be secured. Remain in Spain, and you will be safe. There is no extradition treaty between America and that country. What do you say?"

Sydney Brice awhile was silent; then, with a fierce, mocking laugh, answered, "Needs must when the devil—or a lawyer, which is the same thing—drives!"

"The paper?"

"It is here."

Robert Llandells took it, and perused it; then lighting it at the candle, watched it burn to ashes.

"Now?" said Sydney Brice.

"You are free! Kendal, is the hack waiting?"—on the detective's entrance. "Good! Mind, I trust Mr. Spalding's safety to you!"

The next morning Kendal appeared in the lawyer's office.

"Well, Kendal?" inquired Robert Llandells.

"The Espagnola sailed with the tide at midnight. Spalding was on board as a passenger."

"Good! Now see to the arrest of the others."

Robert Llandells was remarkably light-hearted that day, and promised himself that on

the next he would carry the intelligence he possessed to Glen House. He was to be the bearer of more news than he had imagined.

On opening the *Herald* on the following morning he saw this heading in large type: "Collision in the Harbor—Foundering of the Espagnola."

Yes, it was true. Then followed a rough list of the drowned, and at its head stood the name of Sydney Spalding.

"I will not tell her that yet," reflected Robert Llandells. "My poor darling, she has suffered so much lately."

Evening was settling down when the lawyer arrived at Glen House. As he passed through the grounds he smiled, catching sight of Mildred and the artist sauntering, very close together, along one of the walks. He knew that there was no secret between them, and that their wedding-day was fixed.

Then he entered the house, and proceeded to the drawing-room. Helen was there, and anxiously, but with a flush on her cheek, rose to meet him.

"Ah, you have come!" she exclaimed.

"With news!" he smiled, taking her hands in his.

"And good news!" she broke in, a bright light coming into her eyes. "I read it in your face."

"Had they been bad," he laughed, "I should not have had the courage to be the bearer."

"Sydney Brice—" she murmured.

"Left for Spain yesterday. He will never put foot on American shores again!"

"Oh, happy tidings!"

"Helen," he whispered, leaning nearer to her, "you made a great, noble sacrifice for your sister! Will you make one for me? Will you be my wife?"

"Would that, Robert, be a sacrifice, think you? Have I any way to repay you but by the love I cannot help but give?"

"My darling!"—and he drew her fondly to him. "This, Helen, is, I know, a promise that will not need to be signed and sealed!"

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